

Customer Retention Strategies in Private Schools in Abia State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The fundamental purpose of customer retention efforts is to ensure maintenance of relationships with value adding customers. Today, companies implement retention practices in an attempt to increase customer's commitment to the company. The aims of this study are to examine the strategies used by private schools to retain their parents/guardian and students, evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies on the parent/guardian and students and how often they use them. The commitment – trust theory of relationship marketing provides the theoretical background for this study and it explains that two fundamental factors, trust and commitment must exist for a relationship to be successful in business. The questionnaire was the instruments for data collection. Study population consist all parents/guardian patronizing private schools in Abia state. A sample size of 400 was drawn using Taro Yamani formula. Quantitative data generated as well as formulated hypotheses were tested using Pearson's correlation analysis and chi square. This was done with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study concludes that the parents/guardian and students are committed to schools because strategies like qualified / experienced staff, good environment, adequate structure, affordable cost, and high security will make them remain in the school without defecting to other schools.

Keywords: customer retention, retention strategies, private schools.

Introduction

In the service and non- service industry today, managers find it difficult to retain their customers because they are exposed to related options available to them and as such can easily switch to other brands or defect leaving their initial brands. This has become a wakeup call for top managers of both service and non-service industry to up their game through putting up retention strategies to ensure that their customers don't defect or switch brands easily. According to the Excellence theory of Public Relations, an organization can only be deemed to have attained organizational effectiveness when it is able to establish a sustainable relationship with its various publics on whom its success or failure depends. Relationship management is thus a Public Relations tool for building sustainable relationships between an organization and its publics through relationship maintenance strategies that involve the employment of effective communication strategies among others.

Customer retention is one of the issues that are widely discussed; therefore it is necessary to have a study that explores it, to find out developments up to now. Customer retention is vital for businesses with much research literature now available (Kumar et al., 2017) and in most cases, is regarded as an indicator of acquisition performance, but factors influencing it have rarely been studied in the serial acquirer context (Degbey, 2015).

One of the ways to strengthen customer retention is to create customer relationship management. According to Susa Ward, (2009) customer relationship management refers to the methodologies and tools that help businesses manage customer relationship in an organized way. Customer relationship management processes provides the employee with the information they need to know of their customers' needs and wants and build relationships between the company and its customer

The competition in the private school sector has brought about the fact that school owners this days concentrates not just in admitting new pupils but also devices means of retaining them. It is not just enough to admit pupils into the school system and give them opportunity to defect hence the presence of numerous schools springing up every day is a threat .To create a coherent school marketing strategy ,schools put efforts to enrollment ,retain families of their pupils and encourage them to recommit to their school the following year . This days, the rate at which parent switch or rather change their children from one school to another is alarming. This is because they are in search of either quality in education, affordability, security or one thing or the other as the case may be. In the bid to remain in business, schools have tried so many strategies to make sure that they are not out of the competition. This strategies range from recruitment of qualified/experienced teachers, setting up of good environment, adequate structure, affordable tuition cost, high security, public relation practices to mention but few. The place of public relations/ relationship management cannot be overruled in this study because school business has to do with management of humans ranging from the pupils, the staff and the parents/guardians. Also the place of customer satisfaction will not be ruled out in this study because only a satisfied parent/guardian will remain with her child/children without thinking of defecting or switching.

Customer retention is not only a cost effective and profitable strategy, but in today's business world it is necessary. This is especially true when you remember that 80% of sales come from 20% of customers and clients. (Lake Laura, 2008). Customer retention is more than giving the customer what they expect; it is about exceeding their expectation so that they become loyal advocates for the brand. Fleming and Asplundh, (2009) indicates that engaged customers generates 1.7 times more revenue than normal customers , while having engaged employees and engaged customers return a revenue gain of 3.4 times the norm. Customer retention refers to

Problem Statement

The rate at which parents defect from one school to another with their kids these days is alarming and as such, private school owners strategize and continue to strategize in order to attract and retain their parents/guardians and students which are their customers. Many private schools think that marketing is all about selling services through admission/recruitment of pupils and making profits without knowing whether the parent/guardian and pupils are satisfied with their services or not. The problem that

influenced this study is the fact that it is not fully known if the customer retention strategies employed by private school owners are effective at retaining their parents/guardian and pupils. Possible gaps in the literature reviewed lead support for the need of this present study. As against most empirical studies which dwelt on companies/industries, this study will be examining the different strategies used by private school owners in Abia state to retain their parents / guardians and pupils. Thus not much has been done on schools and their customer retention, going by available literature. The study will also evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, how often they are being used, most effective strategy and other factors other than the ones mentioned that can influence their retention. This study will help private school owners implement the right customer retention strategies and also to develop a good employee – customer relationship keeping a client’s business rather than have the client use competitor’s service or product. Schools want to reduce pupils defect to their competitors because a reduction in their defect means multiplication for their own business. The study has its objectives as determining the effect of tuition cost, public relations, environment, structures & equipment, quality of teachers, and security on customer retention. To achieve these objectives, the following hypotheses stated in null form were proposed.

- Ho₁:** Tuition costs do not significantly influence customer retention.
- Ho₂:** Public relations do not significantly influence customer retention.
- Ho₃:** Environment do not have significant effect on customer retention.
- Ho₄:** Structures and Equipment do not have significant influence on customer retention.
- Ho₅:** Quality of teachers do not significantly influence customer retention.
- Ho₆:** Security do not significantly influence customer retention.

Conceptual Review

Chen et al (2017) reveal that the attributes of price and discount, personal selling and customer relationship have significant impact on likelihood of customer retention, satisfactory price and discounts are a necessary attributes to support the likelihood of customer retention, and satisfactory personal selling is the most important attributes for increasing the likelihood of customer retention.

Companies in a variety of sectors have increasingly started managing customer churn proactively, generally by defecting customers at the highest risk of churning and targeting retention efforts towards them (Ascarza, 2018). Fader et al. (2018) found that even when aggregate retention rates are monotonically increasing, the individual – level churn probabilities are unlikely to be declining overtime, as conventional wisdom would suggest.

Managers can make suitable service improvement plans even with limited resources and once the improvements are duly implemented, the service might get higher user retention in the near future (Hung et al., 2020). Viera et al. (2019) found that salesperson assessment focus amplified locomotion’s effect on acquisition – retention ambidextrous orientation that balances prospecting for new customers and growing existing customers.

Calculations of optimal commission based on customer retention and salesperson attributes helps a sales manager classify sales people according to attributes and the importance of customers from a relationship perspective and it also aids sales managers in implementing an equitable pay structure based not only on salesperson results but also on their behaviors (Echchkoui & Ghilal, 2019). The optimal acquisition and retention expenditure strategies

depend on each firm's marginal customer equity, but not on the market share or the number of customers and in response to the variation of the firm's parameters, if its acquisition effectiveness is greater than its retention effectiveness the firm would take action by making the same investment decision as its rival's; instead, if its acquisition effectiveness is lower than its retention effectiveness, its rival would take action by making the different investment decision from the firm's (S. Chang et al., 2020) Customers are loyal because of their attitude or behavior, and they can be affected through quality products, reputation in the market, location of the store and price levels (Xhema et al., 2018).

Theoretical Review

Commitment Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing postulated by (Morgan and Hunt in 1994) is appropriate for this study because it clearly explains that two fundamental factors, trust and commitment, must exist for a relationship to be successful. In this study, the trust the parent/guardian and their pupils have as a result of their attraction to some of the retention strategies have made them to be committed to schools where their children are enrolled. Since trust and commitment must exist for a relationship to be successful, private schools that do well and breakeven could attribute their success so far to these two variables.

Empirical Reviews

Zaman et al. (2012) examined the effect of customer trust on retention in a company engaged in a cellular service. Their results showed that customer trust affects customer retention. Significant links between customer trust and customer retention were also found by Ang and Buttle (2006). Danesh et al. (2012), Guo et al. (2009), Lewis (2006), Liu et al. (2011), McWilliams and Gerstner (2006). Based on the arguments presented, the hypothesis below was tested in the study. H1: Customer trust has significant effect on customer retention.

Ruiz Diaz (2017) found that in mobile phone market, customer satisfaction influences strongly on customer loyalty, and in turn loyalty is an important determinant of customer retention, similar asymmetrical results were found with regard to other economic, socioeconomic and geographical determinants of customer decisions., as well as analogue effect is also observed in the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty, where only positive satisfaction assessments help to explain the loyalty users

Some scholars have found a significant effect of switching barriers on customer retention. For example, Adiati and Dinna (2014) conducted research in the internet service provider industry and found a positive effect of switching barriers on customer retention. Risdianto (2017) as well as Samudo et al. (2019) similarly showed a significant effect of switching barriers on customer retention. Shamni and Ragel (2018) examined the telecommunication industry and reported a positive effect of switching barriers on customer retention. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2007) found the same relationship in the context of mobile telecommunication services, whereas Danesh et al (2012) reported the same findings in hypermarkets. These findings prompted the hypothesis. H1 Switching barriers have a significant effect on customer retention.

Several researchers found that customer satisfaction significantly influence customer retention in various sectors, namely insurance company. (Daneshfar et al., 2016), life insurance services (Nguyen et al., 2018), banking (Ibojo, 2015; Mohsan et al., 2011), DIY

retail loyalty program (Vessel & Zabkar, 2009), telecommunication network operators. (Gerpott et al., 2001), a continuous purchasing setting. (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003) and hypermarkets (Danesh et al., 2012), a continuous purchasing setting (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003) and hypermarkets (Danesh et al., 2012) Posselt and Gerstner (2015) also argued that customer satisfaction will improve customer retention. These results prompted this hypothesis: H1: Customer satisfaction has a significant effect on customer retention.

Many studies have been confirmed that the implantation of CRM process would result in greater level of customer satisfaction (Richards & Jones, 2009; Adalikwu, 2012; Stojkovic & Dubricic, 2012; Elkordy, 2014; Khedhar 2015; Singh & Singh, 2016). In their study on the effect of CRM on customer satisfaction in banking sector, Hassan et al (2015) found a positive effect of CRM on customer satisfaction.

Kangul et al (2017) defined customer loyalty in terms of their willingness to repeat purchases, referral of new customers and loyalty programs. Using a sample of managers who are responsible for relationships with customers of 147 hotels in Kenya, the researchers found a significant relationship between IT – based CRM application and customer loyalty. The study concluded that the technology infrastructure is a main component of CRM that engenders customer loyalty.

In this vein, Arokiasamy (2005) investigated the impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and intention switch and points out a positive impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty, while there is no significant relationship between customer satisfaction and intention to switch. Hence, the study regards customer satisfaction as a major requirement for customer loyalty. The positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is cited in many works (Bontis et al; 2007; Mohsan et al., 2011; Hafeez & Muhammad, 2012).

Ibojo and Asabi (2015) cited many studies that assure positive impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty, which in turn improves the profitability. Thompson (2005) justifies organizations efforts to gain customer loyalty by numerous factors; increased customer profitability, increased number of customers, and increased quality of products and service. Studies conducted to explore the impact of customer satisfaction on profitability make clear that both variables are positively associated. Coldwell (2001) illustrates that satisfied customers are more profitable than non – satisfied customers. Ibojo et al (2013) found a significant relationship between customer's satisfaction and profitability.

Dubihlela and Molise – Khosa (2014) used a sample of managers of hotels to test the relationship between e – CRM, customer loyalty, customer retention, and customer profitability. Their results accept the hypothesis that customer profitability is significantly associated to customer retention. While customer satisfaction is measured in terms of fulfillment of the gap between customer expectation and customer actual experience, customer retention refers to the continuity of relationship between the organization and the customer. (Ibojo & Asabi, 2015). Bowen and Chen 2001 underline the importance of customer satisfaction in order to ensure customer retention. Subsequently the following hypothesis is presumed H: customer satisfaction has significant influence on customer retention.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Abia state, Nigeria. Parents and guardians who enroll and pay their children and wards school fees constituted the target population. Survey method through the use of questionnaire validated by senior academics and experts from the industry was used. (Kendra, 2020; Ponto, 2015). The 113,700 population of the study comprises all the parents/guardians who patronize private schools in Umuahia and Aba metropolis of Abia State. Available records from the proprietors and proprietresses’ data on the population is indicated on Table 1 below as an appendix. A sample size of 400 was used for this study using Taro Yamani’s formula. In all, a total of 400 respondents were issued with the questionnaire and 363 (representing 90.75% response rate) were considered fit for the study. Multiple regression analysis was used in testing the hypotheses. The regression model is specified thus:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_5 + b_6X_6 + e$$

Where:

Y = Customer retention (i.e. no of years customers have been retained on 5-point scale: 1= ≤ 1 year, 2= 2 years...5= ≥ 5 years)

X₁ = Tuition Cost

X₂ = Public Relations

X₃ = Environment

X₄ = Structures and Equipment

X₅ = Quality of teachers

X₆ = Security

b₀ = Intercept, b₁– b₆ = Coefficients of independent variables, e = error term

X₁ –X₆ were measured on 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree...5=Strongly Agreed).

Results and Discussion

Age and occupation were the two demographics that were used in describing the respondents. These are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographics of respondents

Description	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 – 30	58	15.98
	31 - 43	108	29.75
	44 – 56	152	41.87
	57 & above	45	12.40
Occupation	Trading/Business	141	38.84
	Medical	32	8.82
	Engineering	16	4.41
	Education	92	25.34
	Civil Service	19	5.23
	Others	63	17.36
	TOTAL	363	100

Field Survey: 2021

From Table 2 above, it can be seen that majority of the customers (i.e. parents and guardians) are between the ages of 44 and 56 years. This is followed by age bracket of 31 to 43 years. The occupational distribution shows that majority of the respondents (i.e. 38.84%) are into trading and general business. This is followed by respondents who take education as occupation.

Table 3: Influence of Retention strategies on Customer Retention

Variable	Coefficients	t-ratio	p-value
Constant	3.320 (.395)+	8.414	.000
Tuition Cost	-0.356 (0.077)	-4.648	.000
Public Relations	0.021 (0.063)	0.324	.746
Environment	0.191 (0.073)	2.626	.009
Structures & Equipment	0.315 (0.085)	3.723	.000
Quality of teachers	0.826 (0.414)	1.993	.047
Security	-1.075 (0.414)	-2.599	.010
R ²	0.124		
Adjusted	0.109		
F stat	8.383		.000

Source: Field survey data, 2021

+Figures in parenthesis are the standard errors

Tuition cost has significant effect on customer retention ($p = .000$) and H_{01} is rejected. Charging affordable fees in relation to the competition significantly influence private schools ability to retain the patronage of parents and guardians. This finding resonates with Osano and Lutego (2022) where they observed that price has enormous influence on customer retention. Public Relations do not significantly influence customers retention ($p = .746$) an H_{02} is accepted. The parents and guardians of private schools cannot be significantly retained by public relation practices. Environment significantly influence customers retention ($p = .009$). Good and comfortable environment significantly has effect on private schools owners' ability to retain the patronage of parents and guardians. Private schools' structures and equipment significantly influence customers retention ($p = .000$). This means that structures and equipment of private schools significantly influence customer retention. The quality of teachers significantly influence customer retention ($p = .047$). This implies that increasing the quality of teachers significantly influence the retention of the patronage of parents and guardians in private schools. Security significantly influence customer retention ($p = .010$). Considering recent disturbing security issues in major cities in Nigeria, parents and guardians' patronage can be retained when significant premium is placed on security of pupils, students and their environment by private school owners.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study therefore recommends that:

- (i) Private school owners should charge affordable and competitive tuition fees.
- (ii) Private school owners should continue to create comfortable and conducive environment for study.
- (iii) Private school owners should continue to invest and improve their schools' structures and equipment
- (iv) More attention should be paid to improving the quality of teachers through recruitment, training and exposure to best practices.
- (v) Security of pupils, students, and school environment should be aggressively and innovatively pursued.

Conclusion

The study concludes that tuition cost, environment, structures and equipment, quality of teachers and security significantly influence customer retention.

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APPENDIX I

Table 1: Sample Frame for study

S/N	Private Schools in Abia State	Estimated Population of Parents/Guardians
1	Early learning International School Aba (4 branches)	10000
2	Living Word Academy Umuahia and Aba (10 branches)	28500
3	Evangel Seminary School Aba (5 branches)	3000
4	St Margaret International School Aba	800
5	Jacobseed International Schools Aba	500
6	Christian Day School Umuahia and Aba (10 branches)	30000
7	Martha Day International School Umuahia	1500
8	Career Builders International School Umuahia	2000
9	Amazing Grace Academy Umuahia (6 branches)	5500
10	Basic Foundation Schools Umuahia (2 branches)	2000
11	Lizzy Academy Aba	1000
12	Wonderland International Schools Aba (3 branches)	3200
13	God first Academy Aba (5 branches)	4000
14	Basic Foundation Schools Aba (2 branches)	3200
15	Royalties International Schools Aba	800
16	Divine Lift International Umuahia	1500
17	St Margret International Schools Umuahia and Aba (2 branches)	2200
18	Buckingham College	1300
19	Redeemers International school Aba	3200
20	Intellectual Giants Christian Academy Umuahia and Aba (6 branches)	12700
	TOTAL	113700

Source: School Proprietors/Proprietresses' data