Store image and Marketing performance of supermarkets in south-east region of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper empirically examined store image and marketing performance of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria. The purpose of this paper is to determine to what extent store image enhance marketing performance of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria in order to meet customer needs and wants at profit. The paper adopts the documentary and survey methods. The statistical tool adopted for this paper is the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient with the aid of statistical package for social sciences. The findings of the study show that store image is strongly related to marketing performance of supermarkets. The paper recommends among others that supermarket operators: to embrace modern marketing concept activities; customer relation/services should be stepped up to measure up to those offered by competitors; and that regular publicity and adverts should be organized to promote the image of supermarkets.

Introduction

The importance of store image for supermarket retailers can not be disputed. In the highly competitive and dynamic supermarkets' sector, organizations endeavor to use strategic resources to gain market shares. One way of differentiating one store from another is the unique store image offered to clienteles. Consumers use store image as an evaluative criterion in the decision-making process concerning supermarket selection.

By store image we mean the way the store is defined in the shopper mind, partly by the functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes. These aspects of the predictor variable will in turn respectively account for the following competencies.

(a) Merchandise carried in store (b) customer service.

By marketing performance, we mean the level of achievements by the supermarkets. This could be measured according to previous researchers in terms of sales volume, profit margin and market share. These constructs for the study are not subjectively designed by the present researcher but adopted from models presented by previous researchers like Martineau (1958), Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2008) and Lennon and Burn (2009). This previous researcher used these constructs for the studies in their different environments but the present researcher is using them to study the south east zone situation in Nigeria so as to add to the existing knowledge in the field under study.

It has already been pointed out that store image is complex in nature. This could be one of the reasons as many definitions of store image as scholarly publications can be cited. Early scholars, such as Martineau (1958), described store image as a store's personality and the way in which the store is defined by the shoppers mind, partly by its functional qualities and psychological attributes. According to Lindquist (1974-1975) store image constitutes a combination of tangible and intangible (psychological) factors that consumers perceive to be present in retail stores. The success of a profit making organization is not only assessed by financial measure but is also governed by it operational effectiveness, which is usually a strong determinant in the organizations quest for excellence and survival in highly competitive markets.

The marketing performance of supermarkets determines how it is producing goods and services in the most effective and efficient manner and the extent to which those goods and services satisfy the needs and expectations of customers. In the research that has been conducted, the operational performance of five supermarkets which represent five different chains in Mauritius has been assessed. The study examined the performance dimensions of five supermarkets. For the purpose of this study, one performance dimension will be taking into consideration namely: Profit Margin.

However, the previous researchers did not explore the relationship between store image and marketing performance. Few studies have been carried out in Nigeria to ascertain the extent to which store image affect marketing performance of supermarkets.

Given this knowledge gap, our point of departure from previous studies is to empirically establish the relationship between store image and marketing performance of supermarkets in the south east zone of Nigeria.

Research Problem

Lack of satisfactory services, capacity-under utilization, poor performance, customer dissatisfaction are some of the characteristics of supermarket forms in south east zone of Nigeria. Why supermarkets are unable to identify good store name, or powerful visual trademark, unmistakable store front? How inviting entrance, and compelling store look and hook is promoting patronage of supermarket in the south-east zone of Nigeria. The problem may be poor profit margin, low sales volume and unsatisfactory market share and this result in poor marketing performance of the supermarkets in the Eastern part of the country.

The supermarket firms are faced with the challenges of maintaining market share and profits while attempting new concepts and store formats in an effort to differentiate themselves from other types of retailers. Major demographic and consumer lifestyle changes have affected not only how consumers shop, but also where they choose to shop and eat their meals. Traditional supermarkets have seen a decline in how much shoppers spend and how frequently they shop in a particular store. While some supermarket operators continue to attempt to cut costs so they can offer reduced everyday prices.

There has been much consolidation in the supermarket industry in recent years. The surviving players have realized that they cannot be all things to all people. Instead, they are attempting to do the things they do best better than their competitors. Nearly every survey consistently indicates what today's customers are looking for in their shopping experience:

• Sell what they need and have it in stock when they want it.

• Make it easy for them to shop and find what they are looking for.

• Provide all the information they need in order to quickly decide what to buy.

• Have friendly helpful people available to make the shopping experience a pleasant one.

Theoretical Foundation

It has already been pointed out that store image is complex in nature. This could be one of the reasons why as many definitions of store image as scholarly publications can be cited. Early scholars, such as Martineau (1958) described store image as a stores personality and the way in which the store is defined by the shoppers mind, partly by it functional qualities and psychological attributes. According to Lindquist (1974-1975) store image constitutes a combination of tangible and intangible (psychological) factors that consumers perceive to be present in retail stores. The success of a profit making organization is not only assessed by financial measure but is also governed by it operational effectiveness, which is usually a strong determinant in the organizations quest for excellence and survival in highly competitive markets

According to Kumar and Suresh (2009), while assessing the potential within an industry, an overall organizational strategy must be developed, including some basic choices of the primary basis for competing. As such, they argued that marketing performance priorities are established among the following four characteristics of quality (product performance), cost efficiency (low cost price), dependability (reliable, timely delivery of orders to customers), and flexibility (responding rapidly with new products or changes in volume). (Kumar et al., 2009). A study carried out by Sparks (2010) explains how reorientating the operations strategy of a supermarket such as Asda in the UK led the firm from doom to success. Among the operation priorities were the need to be customer focused, to be a price leader and to increase store productivity. In order to remain competitive, Martineli (2003) elaborated on the following operations strategy as adopted by UK food retailers. This included understanding and meeting customers' needs and behaviors, exercising massive control on supply chain and undertaking new store development programs. On the other hand, Alexander and Akehurst (2000) explained how the use of financial products is a strategy that can enhance customer loyalty. By providing financial services, retailers secure themselves a competitive advantage towards direct competitors: they aim to build stronger and longer customer relationships, derived from customer confidence in the retail store brand
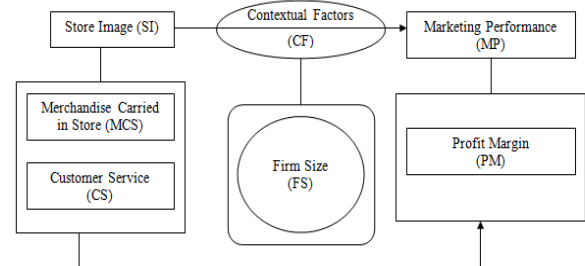
Study variables and conceptual model

The study variables are drawn from the formulated research problem. These are

(1) store image – predictor variable

(2) marketing performance – criterion variable
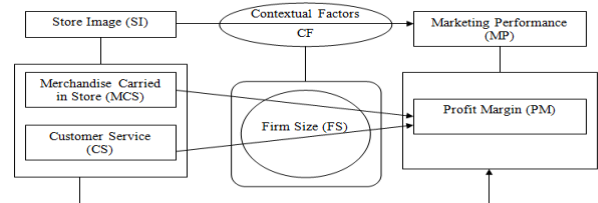
(3) contextual factors – moderating variable

The conceptual framework below shows the relationship among these variables and their dimensions.

Research framework

Source: Desk Research, 2013

Fig 1. Conceptual framework on store image and marketing performance of supermarkets in South East region of Nigeria.

Source: Desk Research, 2013

Fig 2. Operationalization of store image and marketing performance of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria

Hypotheses

Base on the research framework, the following hypotheses are formulated and tested for this paper.

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between merchandise carried in store and profit margin of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria

Ho_2: There is no significant relationship between customer service and profit margin of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria

Ho_3: Firm's level characteristics in the form of size do not significantly affect the influence of store image on marketing performance.

Review of Relevant Literature

In retail store image literature, image is defined as consumer perceptions of both functional (objective) and psychological (subjective) attributes of a store (Lindiquist 2009; Kasulis and Lusch, 2006). Although the concept of store image has existed for a long time, there is no precise or universal definition of it. Firstly, Martineau (1958) suggested that a retail store has a personality and defined store images as:

"The way in which the store is defined in the shoppers mind partly by the functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" "Functional" in this definition, refers to physical properties such as merchandise selection, price ranges, and store layout. "Psychological" refers to such things as a sense of belonging, the feeling of friendliness and the like.

Retailers have utilized store image as a marketing tool in the retailing industry in order to define their markets and enhance business performance. Particularly, marketing literature report that store image has been identified as one of the significant components that influences economic success in retailing

(Jacoby and Mazursky, 2006) as it is link to store choice (Doyle and Fenwick, 2004; Malhotra, 2003), store loyalty (Lessig 1993; Renolds et al, 2004-2005; Osman, 1993), successful store positioning (Pessemier, 2008; Davies and Brooks, 1998) and as a means of achieving competitive advantage (James et al 2006)

Formation of store image

Physical attributes behave as solely stimulus capable of developing certain relationships in an individual's mind (Nelson, 2002). The relationship is labeled "Image" and may be pleasant or unpleasant. There are numerous complex psychological processes involved in image formation (Hirschman 2008) defined retail store image as an image developing formation. The definition implied that retail store image is a subjective phenomenon and is generated from the knowledge about a store and consistent with an individual's unique cognition.

Combining the two approaches, the behavioral concept and the developing formation, Mazursky and Jacoby (1996), proposed the meaning of image. According to them, image is "a set of cognition and or affect which is inferred either from a set of ongoing perceptions and or memory inputs attaching to a phenomenon and which represents what phenomenon signifies to an individual".

The definition stresses two properties - one is that the image is only cognitive (i.e., I like or dislike the store). The other properly emphasizes the process of image formation (Mazursky and Jacoby, 2006). The store image formation process is a subjective phenomenon taking place in the perceived store and is believed to occur in sequential manner. This finding indicated that an individual uses different objective signals to conclude different image aspects.

Rosembloom (2003) introduced three models of store image development.

1. A Market-Based Store Image Model (MBSIM), in which the congruence is achieved between store image dimension and consumer's store choice evaluation criteria.

2. An Internally-Based Store Image Model (IBSIM), in which the congruence is achieved between store image dimension and traditional values held by the store's founders.

3. A Trade-Based Store Image Model (TBSIM), in which the congruence is achieved between retailer's store image and typical image projected by peer reference group.

Store image management

As mentioned earlier, the study of image is necessary for the management of any company in order to have a clear picture of the company's image. However, Oppewal and Timmermans (2007) argue that retailer perceptions of store image may differ in systematic ways from the consumer's store image. Barich and Kotler (1991), further argued that companies need to identify the positive and negative points of their image and take the needed restorative actions through an image tracking and management system. They described this system as: "a system of periodically collecting, analyzing and acting on information that describes how different publics view key attributes of the company's performance".

Consumers perceived store image vs retailer anticipated store image

When consumers shop at a certain store, they are exposed to a store manipulated by retailers. Consumers infer the total perception of the store image. During this process, consumers perceived store image is partially controlled by the retailer's intention. Pathank et al (2004-5), proposed the idea of the anticipated store image which involves the retailer's perception of what they believe to be the consumer's image of their store used in order to compare consumer's perceived image and

retailers anticipated image. Samli et al, (2008), pointed out that, usually, management observe the retail store in one way, which implies a perceived image and the customers also observe the store in their own way, which is also a perceived image. When differences exist between management and customer image, corrective actions should be taken to provide congruence of perception between these two groups.

Merchandise carried in store

Merchandising is the methods, practices, and operations used to promote and sustain certain categories of commercial activity. In the broadest sense, merchandising is any practice which contributes to the sale of products to a retail consumer. At a retail in-store level, merchandising refers to the variety of products available for sale and the display of those products in such a way that it stimulates interest and entices customers to make a purchase.

In order to investigate the importance of store image attributes in store choice, Hansen and Deutscher (1977-8) showed that the market segmentation provides a means of identifying the major characteristics as related to benefits. Using the consumer based methodology, Steenkamp and Wedel (1991) segmented retail markets on store image including product quality, price, assortment, service quality and atmosphere. Consumers were separated in three groups: light spenders, low involved buyers, and heavily involved buyers. While price did not influence heavy spenders, low-involved buyers considered product quality, light spenders considered store atmosphere, and all segments considered service quality.

Customer services

Customer service is the provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase.

According to Turban et al. (2002), "Customer service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction – that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the customer expectation."

Its importance varies by products, industry and customer; defective or broken merchandise can be exchanged, often only with a receipt and within a specified time frame. Retail stores often have a desk or counter devoted to dealing with returns, exchanges and complaints, or will perform related functions at the point of sale; the perceived success of such interactions being dependent on employees "who can adjust themselves to the personality of the guest," according to Micah Solomon quoted in Inc Magazine. A customer service experience can change the entire perception a customer has of the organization.

Marketing performance

On the side of marketing performance, Leonidou et al (2001) described it as the output of firm involved with the business of buying and selling transaction. Marketing performance according to Nkamnebe (2004), could be measured in terms of sales volume, profit, and market share. In this present study, marketing performance is therefore measured in terms profit margin of the supermarket sector. In a study of performance measures in literature, Sousa (2004: 29) stated that the area of marketing performance is attracting both academic and managerial attention at an increasing pace.

The success of a profit making organization is not only assessed by financial measure but is also governed by its operational effectiveness, which is usually a strong determinant in the organization quest for excellence and survival in highly competitive markets. Marketing performance of supermarkets determines how far it is selling goods and services in the most effective and efficient manner and the extent to which the goods

and services satisfy the needs and expectations of customers (Lomendra 2008).

The retailing industry's business has been around for centuries in the world. Research has shown that the advent of globalization, mechanization, modernization and technology advancements have had and are still having a great impact on the retailing industry. Nowadays, supermarkets play an important role in serving the local community. They are the places where majority of people would shop for food items and grocery. In this competitive and turbulent business environment, it becomes primordial for supermarket operators to sustain business developments and foster customer trust by upholding good practices in their operations (Kumar et al., 2009).

Indicators of marketing performance

The indicator of marketing performance in this study is profit.

Profit

Profit is the different between investments and returns of a venture. It is the total realizable gains after the deduction of initial capital outlay and taxes.

Retailers can measure their profit by using two basic methods, markup and margin, both of which give a description of the gross profit. The markup expresses profit as a percentage of the retailer's cost for the product. The margin expresses profit as a percentage of the retailer's sales price for the product. These two methods give different percentages as results, but both percentages are valid descriptions of the retailer's profit. It is important to specify which method they are using when they refer to a retailer's profit as a percentage.

Some retailers use margins because you can easily calculate profits from a sales total. If their margin is 30%, then 30% of their sales total is profit. If their markup is 30%, the percentage of their daily sales that are profit will not be the same percentage.

Firm's size as a moderating variable

At the most basic level, firm-level strategy seeks to develop positional advantages based on differentiation or cost advantages. Recognizing that these strategic choices likely influence price promotion strategy, we consider three characteristics that are directly linked to firm-level strategy: retailer differentiation and two sources of cost advantage— average store size and number of stores in the chain.

Size of the firm

The expected relationship between price promotion strategies and number of stores and average store size is based on cost advantages associated with operational scale and scope. A retailer's scale can be considered within the context of the number of stores managed by the retail firm; that is, holding store size constant, increasing the number of stores increases operational scale. The size of a physical store largely determines the number of product categories and/or items that can be offered; thus, as store size increases, operational scope increases. (Thomas *et al.*, 1995).

Store image and marketing performance

Store image acts as a criterion in the choice process. Sheth (2006), presented a conceptual model of shopping preference. In this model, image was proposed as a prior determinant in the choice process and as a basis for the evaluation of an entity.

Monroe and Guiltinan (2007), investigated casual influence in store choice by comparing three time periods of data. The casual structure guiding store choice is: general opinions/ activities and store perceptions precede specific planning and budgeting, which precede the importance of the information attributes, for instance, advertisements.

In order to predict store choice behaviour, Malhotra (2008), proposed a patronage model that described the preference of the value of a store formed by important attributes and preferences of a store. The researcher identified five store images: variety and selection, personnel and service, acceptable price, convenient location, and physical facilities. Then he clustered consumers by level of importance of each attribute. The model revealed that each cluster had different preferences and the entire cluster considered the importance of merchandise selection, price and location.

As related to a study of store loyalty, Lessig (2006), examined the relationship between store image and store loyalty in order to predict store loyalty using store image attributes. The importance of the influence which store image has upon marketing performance was indicated. The nature and strength of the relationship between image and loyalty was that knowledge of the store image provides a significant input into the simultaneous prediction of loyalties to the alternative retail stores. Reynolds, et al (2005), developed store image for the store loyal customers based on customer lifestyle and emphasized that the convenience of local shopping was important to the time-conscious shopper.

Customer service and marketing performance

Customer service is the provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase.

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Its importance varies by products, industry and customer; defective or broken merchandise can be exchanged, often only with a receipt and within a specified time frame. Retail stores often have a desk or counter devoted to dealing with returns, exchanges and complaints, or will perform related functions at the point of sale; the perceived success of such interactions being dependent on employees "who can adjust themselves to the personality of the guest," according to Micah Solomon quoted in Inc Magazine.

From the point of view of an overall sales process engineering effort, customer service plays an important role in an organization's ability to generate income and revenue. From that perspective, customer service should be included as part of an overall approach to systematic improvement. A customer service experience can change the entire perception a customer has of the organization.

Some have argued that the quality and level of customer service has decreased in recent years, and that this can be attributed to a lack of support or understanding at the executive and middle management levels of a corporation and/or a customer service policy. To address this argument, many organizations have employed a variety of methods to improve their customer satisfaction levels.

Customer support is a range of customer services to assist customers in making cost effective and correct use of a product. It includes assistance in planning, installation, training, trouble shooting, maintenance, upgrading, and disposal of a product.

One of the most important aspects of a customer service is that of what is often referred to as the "Feel Good Factor." Basically the goal is to not only help the customer have a good experience, but to offer them an experience that exceeds their expectations. Several key points are listed as follows

Table 1. List of Registered Supermarkets in the South-East Region of Nigeria

State	No. of Registered Supermarkets
Abia State	1003
Anambra State	971
Ebonyi State	286
Enugu State	614
Imo State	521
Total	3,395

Decision rule table for hypothesis one

Model	Summary
R^2	0.499
Adjusted r^2	0.426
F-statistic	0.159
Prob. of F-statistic	0.016

Source: Survey Data, 2013.

Decision Rule Table for Hypothesis Two

Model	Summary
R^2	0.442
Adjusted r^2	0.213
F-statistic	1.421
Prob. of F-statistic	0.023

Source: Survey data, 2013.

Decision rule table for hypothesis three

Model	Summary
R^2	0.332
Adjusted r^2	0.281
F-statistic	0.058
Prob. of F-statistic	0.041

Source: Survey data, 2013.

1. Know your product – Know what products/service you are offering back [to front. In other words be an information expert. It is okay to say "I don't know," but it should always be followed up by "but let me find out" or possibly "but my friend knows!" Whatever the situation may be, make sure that you don't leave your customer with an unanswered question.

2. Body Language/Communication – Most of the communication that we relay to others is done through body language. If we have a negative body language when we interact with others it can show our lack of care. Two of the most important parts of positive body language are smiling and eye contact. Make sure to look your customers in the eye. It shows that we are listening to them, not at them. And then of course smiling is just more inviting than someone who has a blank look on their face.

3. Anticipate Guest Needs – Nothing surprises your customer more than an employee going the extra mile to help them. Always look for ways to serve your customer more than they expect. In doing so it helps them to know that you care and it will leave them with the "Feel Good Factor" that we are searching for.

Research Methodology

This research study is a descriptive research study, this is informed by the type of phenomenon under study and also because the variable under study were not under the control of the researchers. Therefore the quasi-experimental design became the most appropriate in achieving the objectives of this research study. The researchers adopted cross sectional study on the basis that the research involved selecting samples of element from the population of interest measurable at a particular point in time.

Sample size determination technique

Information from the ministry of commerce and industry revealed the following as the number of registered supermarkets in the South-East region of Nigerian;

Sources:

Ministry of Commerce and Industry (South-East Region of Nigeria) 2013.

Consequently, this total number of three thousand, three hundred and ninety five (3,395) were the accessible population of the study. The Taro- Yamen's sample size determination formula shall be used to determine the sample size to be used for this study, as it is in (Baridam, 2008),

The researchers believes that there is a 95 percent (0,05 significant level) chance that the sample is distributed in the same way as the population. The Taro Yamen's formula is statistically stated as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where   n = Sample Size Sought

N = Population Size

e = Level of Significance

Applying the above formula, we have

N = 3,395

e = 0.05 Thus, n = 3,395

$$n = \frac{3,395}{1+3,395(0.05)^2}$$

$$= \frac{3,395}{1+8.49}$$

$$= \frac{3,395}{9.49}$$

$$n = 358$$

This meant that three hundred and fifty eight (358) copies of the questionnaire was distributed to respondents in the South-East of Nigeria

The spearman Rank Order correlation Coefficient statistical tool was adopted for data analysis, with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Result and discussions

Hypothesis One: H01: There is no significant relationship between merchandise carried in store and the profit margin of supermarkets in the South-East region of Port Harcourt.

Decision Rule

The result of the correlation test above reveals that a significant relationship exists between merchandise carried in store and the profit margin of supermarkets, this is evident in the correlation value of 0.499 (50%) and a significant F-statistic probability value of 0.016, which is less than 5% level of significance. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis one and accept the alternative hypothesis one. Thus, there is a significant relationship between merchandise carried in store and the profit margin of supermarkets.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant relationship between customer service and profit margin of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria.

Decision Rule

The correlation test result reveals that a significant relationship exist between customer service and profit margin of supermarkets, this is evident in the correlation value of 0.442 (44%) and a significant F-statistic probability value of 0.023 which was less than 5% level of significance. We therefore reject null hypothesis five and accept the alternative hypothesis five. Thus, there is a significant relationship between customer service and profit margin of supermarkets.

Hypothesis Three:

Firm's level characteristics in the form of size do not significantly affect the influence of store image on marketing performance in South-East region of Port-Harcourt

Decision Rule

The correlation test result above reveals that a significant relationship exists between firm's level characteristics in the form of size and store image on marketing performance. This stand is evident in the correlation value of 0.332 (33%) and a significant F-statistic probability value of 0.041, which was less than 5% level of significance. We therefore reject the null hypothesis three and accept the alternative hypothesis seven. Thus, firm's level characteristics in form of size will significantly affect the influence of store image on marketing performance of supermarket.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusions

Consequent on the discussions above, the following conclusions were made by the researcher;

i) The merchandise carried in store has significant influence on the profit margin of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria.

ii) Customer service has significant influence on the profit margin of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria.

iii) Firm's level characteristics in form of size, significantly affects the influence of store image on marketing performance of supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria.

Recommendations

In view of the above conclusions, the following recommendations were considered relevant;The modern marketing concept which sees the customer as the center of every marketing activity should be seriously embraced by the authorities of the supermarkets in South-East region of Nigeria.

1. Supermarkets, for efficient and effective sales performance, should ensure that they carry vast stocks and varieties of regular consumer goods and items.

2. Customer relations/services of the supermarkets should be stepped up to measure up to those offered by competitors so as to help retain existing customers, while at the same time, attracting prospecting consumers.

3. Supermarkets should indulge in periodic appraisal of their general marketing performance since this could serve as a medium of measuring the progress made over time.

4. Regular publicities and adverts should be organized to promote and boost the image of supermarkets since such may serve as a means of increasing the volume of sales of the supermarkets.

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