

RETAIL WORKERS' PERCEPTION OF SOFT SKILLS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESSFUL PERSONAL SELLING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Introduction

Retailing is important in the supply chain given that it links manufacturers to consumers. It includes all the activities involved in selling products or services directly to final consumers for their personal, non-business use (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Thus, a retailer is a business that sells products and services to ultimate consumers (Dibb, Simkin, Pride & Ferrell, 1994). Kotler and Armstrong (2008) define retailers more succinctly as businesses whose sales come primarily from retailing. Retailing can be non-store or in-store. Non-store retailing includes retail activities performed outside a store such as door-to-door selling of a restaurant's offers. In-store retailing, on the other hand, involves the performance of retail activities within a retail facility such as sale of groceries in a supermarket or department store or sale of apparel in a specialty store.

Specialty stores carry narrow product lines (Kotler & Keller, 2007) while department stores and supermarkets carry several product lines. However, in department stores (unlike in supermarkets) the various product categories are separated in terms of their location within the store, management and accounting. While some of these retail facilities may be found standing alone in strategic locations in hearts of towns, the prominent, high class ones such as Shoprite and Games are usually located in shopping malls. A shopping mall is a closed building with controlled temperature and lights, in which the shops aligned on two sides are separated by closed streets and alleys (Reikli, 2012). Thus, shopping mall is a complex of shops (Specialty, supermarkets, department stores, etc) made up of one or more buildings and laid out in such a way that customers can easily walk from one shop to another. In a report by Business Day Intelligence (2014), it was stated that there are over 10 shopping malls of international standard in Lagos. The report also stated that the major malls include: The Palms Shopping Mall, Ikeja City Mall, Adeniran Ogunsanya Shopping Center, Cocoa Mall Park Lane and City Mall. Each of these malls is large with many functional shops. For

example, The Palms Shopping Mall has a total retail floor area of 20,000m and 69 shops and parking space for 1000 cars (Fatowore, 2008). In addition, many of the malls have Shoprite, which is arguably Nigeria's largest grocery retailer, as anchor tenant. The coming of shopping malls in Lagos changed the retail landscape in some dramatic ways - Customers now enjoy highly attractive retail environments with wide variety of goods and services in the same location. However, competition among different retailers is escalating.

Those who work in retail business premises, assisting customers with the selection and purchase of goods are known as retail workers. In Nigeria, the retail workforce usually have young age profiles as people take up retail jobs from after basic or senior secondary education. They are normally hired to work as part time or full-time employees. Retail workers are different from direct sellers. Grayson (2000) argues that the major differences between retail workers and direct sellers is that retail workers are paid hourly or salary and work in a permanent retail location such as department stores or specialty shops while direct sellers work on commission away from fixed retail outlets. Garryson (2000), however, noted that both retail workers and direct sellers spend a large percentage of their working hours interacting with customers. In addition, both take primary responsibility for day-to-day personal selling of products and services.

Personal selling is an old profession that involves personal interaction with customers for the purpose of making sales. Jobber (2001), thus, describe personal selling as the marketing task involving face-to-face contact with a customer. Similarly, Kotler and Armstrong (2008) define personal selling as personal presentation by firm's sales force for the purpose of making sales and building customer relationships. Thus, unlike advertising, promotion, sponsorship and other forms of non-personal communication, personal selling permits a direct interaction between a buyer and a seller. In light of the foregoing, selling can be viewed as the final step in the marketing process that converts marketing efforts into money and sound customer relationships. Selling is thus, described by Kotler and Keller (2007) as the tip of the marketing's iceberg. However, selling in the 21st century is not just about making sales and profits. Modern selling is characterized by customer relationship management, satisfying customer needs and solving problems (Jobber & Lancaster, 2009). It is also about ethics, trust and adapting to change. Indeed, the 21st century is characterized by rapid change mainly driven by information and communication technologies (ICTs). The ICTs now available in most countries have connected the whole world into a global village, enhancing awareness and competition. Accordingly, consumer behaviours and expectations are continuously changing. For instance,

consumers are now more technology savvy and as a result, encounter an ever-widening range of information. Uncles (2006) states that customers are empowered by the information that technology makes available and are no longer dependent on salespersons and promotions, but can obtain the latest facts from authoritative sources simply by searching Google or yahoo. The author also noted that ‘best buy’ information, product specifications, competing offers and cross-buying opportunities are at the fingertips of customers. Similarly, Weitz and Whitfield (2006) found that 40% of consumers collect information from the internet before they go to stores for significant purchases. In addition, customers now interact with increasing number of retailers – in-store, on street and online. Customers have generally become choosier and more assertive, exerting control over purchasing and consumption decisions unlike few decades ago when they were passive recipients of retailers’ offers. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) argue that retailers who respond positively to these expectations find customers to be advocates, whereas the opposite is true when relations turn sour – then customers are in danger of becoming adversaries.

Indeed, as the nature of customers and social interactions changes, retailing requires a different skills set. In this 21st century, retailers must be able to perform non-routine creative tasks in collaboration with others. Thus, while the traditional retail skills such as receiving orders and stacking shelves remain critical and fundamental to success, retail workers must possess soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, problem solving and negotiation. These soft skills are not necessarily new but they have become basic requirements for succeeding in personal selling in the 21st century.

Soft skills refer to behavioural competencies that relate to dealing with people. Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) define soft skills as a collection of people management skills and emphasise that the term ‘soft skills’ is not synonymous with attitudes or values. Aworanti (2012) argued that soft skills are important to many professions and job positions as they complement the hard skills part of a person’s IQ. Similarly, Cimatti (2016) states that the term soft skills is used to indicate all the competences that are not directly connected to a specific task; they are necessary in any position as they mainly refer to the relationships with other people involved in the organization. The author further explained that soft skills are considered a strategic element in any industrial organization and they deserve high attention from human resources management divisions, not only in the recruitment phase but also during the whole professional career of employees. The broad categories of soft skills include: Interpersonal Skills, such as teamwork skills

and customer service skills; Thinking Skills, such as decision-making and knowing how to learn; and Personal Skills, such as sociability and self-management (Kim, Erdem, Byun, & Jeong, 2011). Since in-store retailing is purely customer-facing, retailers will be more successful if their retail workers can communicate effectively, negotiate appropriately and collaborate with customers to achieve their shopping objectives.

In spite of the role that good levels of soft skills play in aiding retailing in the 21st century, education and training in Retail Management seem to exclude these important skills. One likely reason retail management educators have been unable to incorporate skills is the confusion about what exactly to integrate. Indeed, soft skills such as communication, collaboration and critical thinking are highly dimensional and the dimensions that apply to retailing have not been fully identified and integrated into retail management training programmes. As Stratfor (2008) reports, lack of quality education has made the Nigerian retail workers shallow. Indeed, some retail workers do not have the skills and attitudes required to meet the needs of 21st century customers. Many retail workers cannot communicate effectively with customers – they cannot listen attentively without interrupting, and they cannot ask leading questions to understand customers' needs. Instead, they cut customers short and use languages that are not only confusing but deliberately deceptive and manipulative. Some cannot negotiate appropriately and collaborate with customers to achieve their shopping goals. Unfortunately, poor customer service is becoming more and more unacceptable. Customers in the 21st century, given their sophistication, have limited tolerance for poor skills. Many customers who have experienced the poor skills have responded in some unfavourable ways including switching to shopping over the internet in foreign shops. These responses have made it difficult for many Nigerian-based in-store retailers to grow consistently over years. In light of the foregoing, this study seeks to identify the soft skills required by in-store retailers for successful personal selling in the 21st century.

Method

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in Lagos because the State has the most shopping malls and the most organized retail structure in Nigeria (Business Day Intelligence, 2014). Subjects were 160 workers of 80 retailers in 3 large shopping malls in Lagos (102 females and 58 males). The retailers were identified through physical visits. During the visits, the researchers enquired from the retail workers about the tenure in retailing. Workers who did not have up to 2 years retailing experience were excluded from the study. Stratified random sampling was

used to select the 80 retailers proportionally from the 3 shopping malls – The Palms, Adniran Ogunsanya Mall and Ikeja City Mall. A maximum of two retail workers were selected from each store. The subjects were randomly picked if such workers were more than two in a store. Altogether, the sample was made up of retail workers with varying years of working experience (mean work experience = 4.7 years; standard deviation = 3.51). Their ages ranged from 17 to 44 years, with mean age of 24.7 and a standard deviation of 5.74.

A 4- point likert-type structured questionnaire developed by the researchers and validated by three experts in marketing and two experts in psychology was used for the purpose of this study. It consisted of two sections (A and B). Section A comprised three items that solicited personal information about respondents (age, sex and years of work experience) while Section B comprised 20 items on soft skills in communication, critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, negotiation and follow up. Respondents were requested to indicate the degree to which the skills and attitudes were required by checking (i) Highly required (ii) Required (iii) Not required (iv) Highly not required. The questionnaire was pre-tested using 17 retail workers of 7 retailers in Enugu who had up to two years retail work experience. The pre-test results showed no ambiguity in the instrument and produced a Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient (for internal consistency reliability) of 0.83.

The questionnaire was administered by one of the researchers and 2 research assistants who were engaged to enhance timely distribution and collection. The research assistants were briefed on the research objectives as well as when and how to approach the subjects in order to get their cooperation. In addition, they were taught to explain the individual items on the questionnaire should the subjects require explanations. One Hundred and twenty copies of the questionnaire were eventually retrieved, representing 75% retrieval rate. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the data collected. Any item with mean value between 3.50 and 4.00 were considered highly required while items with mean value between 2.50 and 3.49 were considered required. On the other hand, items with mean value between 1.50 and 2.49 were considered not required while any item with mean value less than 1.50 was considered highly not required. All computations were done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16.0.

Results

The results of the study are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Mean Responses of Retail workers on Soft Skills Required for Successful Personal Selling in the 21st Century

S/No	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remark
Communication				
1	Holding effective oral conversation with customers	3.57	0.37	Highly Required
2	Creating high-impact written messages to aid selling	2.56	0.51	Required
3	decoding customers' non-verbal cues	3.41	0.48	Required
4	Tailoring words and tone to customer needs	3.45	0.61	Required
5	Listening attentively to customers	3.55	0.56	Highly Required
6	Asking open-ended questions to get information from customers	3.24	0.68	Required
7	Engaging customers on social media platforms	2.58	0.58	Required
Critical thinking				
8	Seeking clear understanding of customers' situation before talking about products	2.61	0.51	Required
9	Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information provided by customers	2.68	0.51	Required
Collaborative Problem solving				
10	Respecting customers' beliefs	3.65	0.56	Highly Required
11	Helping customers achieve their shopping objectives by allowing trials, effective demonstrations, etc	3.54	0.68	Highly Required
12	Responding quickly to customer complaints	3.41	0.48	Required
13	Handling objections	3.52	0.48	Highly Required
Negotiation				
14	Reaching a favorable win-win resolution with customers	2.52	0.58	Required
15	Stressing value for money rather than	2.47	0.51	Not

	price			Required
16	Improving customer relationship while negotiating	2.61	0.51	Required
17	Cheerfully allowing customers to walk away if no favourable agreement is reached	2.50	0.48	Required
	Follow-up			
18	Appreciating customers for their patronage	3.72	0.48	Highly Required
19	Requesting feedback to ensure that customers are satisfied with the purchase	2.51	0.56	Required
20	Remembering customers' important events	2.73	0.68	Required

Table 1 shows that only item 15 (Stressing value for money rather than price) has mean score below 2.50 which indicates that the skill is not required for successful personal selling in the 21st century. On the other hand, six items (1, 5, 10, 11, 13, and 18) have means between 3.50 and 4.00 and are therefore highly required. Overall, collaborative problem solving skills items have the highest mean scores while the negotiation skills have the lowest mean scores.

Discussion

The finding that holding effective oral communication was highly required is consonant with the body of knowledge in retailing (e.g. Van Staden, 2004; and Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn, 1995). Good quality merchandise do not sell themselves all the time. Retailers need to communicate with customers to stimulate recognition, provide information to help customers evaluate merchandise, present and demonstrate merchandise and encourage them to make a purchase decision. These set of activities require strong oral communication skills to perform successfully. The findings that listening attentively to customers, asking open-ended questions to get information from customers, tailoring words and tone to customers' needs and handling objections presented by customers are required, align with Marshall, Goebel and Moncrief (2003) who found that listening skills, verbal communication skills, ability to adapt sales style from situation to situation; and ability to overcome objections are among the top ten success factors in selling.

The finding that 'stressing value for money instead of price' is not required as well as the relatively low mean scores of the items "reaching a favourable win-win resolution with customers", "improving relationship with

customers while negotiating” and “cheerfully allowing customers to walk away when no favourable agreement is reached”, indicate that the respondents did not seem to appreciate the need for negotiation skills in selling. This finding was unexpected. Since negotiation is any communication with an intention to influence or persuade (Bordone cited in Adeniji, 2015), the researchers expected that it will be highly required in personal selling process.

Recommendations

In order to equip retail workers with the skills they require for success in the 21st century, retail trainers and educators would need to refocus retail education on contemporary issues such as those driven by the impacts of globalization - open access to information, ICT and global competition to support current and future retail workers in mastering both content and relevant soft skills and attitudes. In order to achieve this, the following would need to be done.

1. Educators should develop their capacity to teach the required soft skills in the context of core retail topics. Teachers would need to embed the teaching of relevant soft skills into the teaching of the core subject. Teachers should also use teaching techniques that promote 21st century skills learning such as group projects, making presentations, etc. Since projects allow students to work in groups, teachers have opportunity to help them become good communicators, team players and respectful people, working with others to solve problem creatively. Teachers should also use interactive classroom instructions and assessment practices that allow students to create their own answers and write extensively. These can help students and trainees develop relevant soft skills while mastering the core contents.
2. Training institutions and personnel should support innovative changes in retail education by reviewing their curriculum to reflect relevant soft skills required by retail workers for successful personal selling in the 21st century.
3. Researchers in business education should support modern retail education by developing rubrics to help teachers in assessment of 21st century skills as well as assist students in developing themselves using the rubrics.

Conclusion

This paper has identify the soft skills and attitudes required by in-store retailers for successful selling in the 21st century. The aim was to provide clarity about the dimensions of 21st century skills that relate to personal selling

in retail context. The study has identified 19 relevant soft skills related to communication, critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, negotiation and follow-up. The researchers encourage stakeholders in retail education, especially teachers and curriculum planners to weave the teaching of the skills into the teaching of core retail management contents in order to improve the competence of retail workers and ultimately help retail institutions in becoming more competitive and successful.

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