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RETENTION OF MOBILE (CELL) PHONE SUBSCRIBERS OF MILLICOM GHANA LIMITED (TIGO) IN ADABRAKA-ACCRA, GHANA*

WILSON EDZORNA DZISAH[†]
Accra Polytechnic

ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to examine the issues of customer retention within the Cell or Mobile phone sector of the Telecommunications in Ghana with a focus on Millicom Ghana Limited (Tigo). The study captured the review of similar studies that other researchers, institutions etc have conducted in the topic area. Generally, the study has shown that, effective customer service influences customer satisfaction positively and directs customer behavioural intentions which culminate in their loyalty hence retention. The study outlined the methods employed to do this study. It explained how the sample was selected and data gathered from the two data sources. The data collected was presented and analyzed. The major variables discussed were customer service, customer satisfaction and customer retention. The study found out that mobile phone users consider the overall service value offered them. Also, it was found that customers are influenced by the reliability of the service operator which tends to shape their behavioural intentions of a mobile service operator hence loyalty and retention.

Keywords: Customer service; Customer satisfaction; Behavioural intentions; Customer retention.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of retaining one's customers is an important marketing programme and philosophy. Marketing as we have come to understand has its focus on the customers' needs, wants, preference, attitudes, lifestyles, etc. Indeed, marketing concept suggests that the logical place to start the search for new product ideas are the customers need and wants (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010).

Companies gain competitive advantage by identifying and satisfying customer needs better and faster than competitors. Customer satisfaction, therefore, serves as a potential means for increasing an organization's customer base. The increase usage of more satisfied customers in promotion, all things being equal, increases the firm's reputation (Fornell, 2002, Levesque and McDaugall, 2007). One important means to achieving customer satisfaction is customers' service. Customer service is the provision of complementary services to customers, before, during and after a purchase. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) saw customer

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[†] Corresponding author Email: edzisah@yahoo.com

service as a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the expectation of the customer.

The Ghanaian telecommunication industry for one, has witnessed significant rise in competition in recent years due largely to the deregulation policy of the government and the advent of mobile telecommunication companies. Another complex dimension to the competitive trend in the Ghanaian telecommunication industry is the ease and rate at which products like the SIM cards and services are duplicated in the industry and multi dimension nature of communication. This trend fosters a scenario of continuous fight for customers share (Menzela, 1999) and, an increasing need to build loyal customers through effective customer's service activities.

Loyal customers, from cost perspective tend to stay longer with the preferred providers, buy more and generate favourable word-of-mouth effect that may further benefit the preferred provider (Reicheld and Kenny, 2006).

Furthermore, majority of these researches have been under-taken in settings outside the telecommunication industry and other economies. Therefore, given the competitive battle currently in the Ghanaian telecommunication industry and the fact that should the "if intention criteria" not well managed according to Abratt and Russell (2009), "customers may leave their service provider irrespective of retention efforts".

The Ghanaian mobile telecommunication landscape began with Millicom Ghana Limited Mobitel now christened "Tigo" and continues to be widened and broadened with more and more companies ever ready to come into the country at anytime, and any day. This overzealous interest from new operators is coming at a time of persistent grumblings over perceived service failures and ease of customer switch among networks at a time of consistent call drops and rapid call costs contrary to the tantalizing messages through adverts on all the media leaves bare questions about retention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of Marketing and Customer Retention

The American Marketing Association defines marketing as "The Process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives".

The British Chartered Institute of Marketing defines the Concept as "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably".

To the researcher, both the definitions captured above maintained that marketing is a process that uncovers customer needs and satisfying them effectively and efficiently. This prerequisite demands that an organisation attract, satisfy, retain and ensure long lasting relationship. Customer retention is a daisy issue perhaps in any African market where data collection is cumbersome and difficult due to improper planning and illiteracy and cultural rigidities.

Customer Retention is defined by Colgate et al (2006) as "the activity that a selling organization undertakes in order to reduce customer defections". Successful customer retention starts with the first contact an organization has with a customer and continues throughout the entire lifetime of a relationship. A company's ability to attract and retain new customers, is not only related to its product or services, but strongly related to the way it services its existing customers and the reputation it creates within and across the marketplace. Abratt and Russel (2009) argued that the approach towards existing customers must be active, based on a separate marketing mix for customer retention. He then proposed Retention

Marketing Mix, which include the following; Product extra, Reinforcing promotions, Sales-force connections, Specialised distribution, and Post-purchase communication.

Gummesson (1997) argued that “The role of the 4Ps is changing from being founding parameters of marketing to one of being contributing parameters to relationships, network and interaction” he proposed 30 Rs (relationship) parameters which illustrate the role of marketing as a mix of relationships, networks and interaction.

Grönroos (2007) put forward several arguments to support Gummesson’s assertion and add that relationship marketing offers all the necessary ingredients to become the new marketing paradigm, because the existing marketing mix is not suitable to support a relationship-based approach.

Customer retention is more than giving the customer what they expect; it’s about exceeding their expectations so that they become loyal advocates for your brand”. Creating customer loyalty puts ‘customer value rather than maximizing profits and shareholder value at the centre of business strategy’. The key differentiator in a competitive environment is more often than not the delivery of a consistently high standard of customer service (Woodruff, 2007)

Customer Satisfaction

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2010), “Customer Satisfaction is a person’s feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product perceived performance or outcome in relation to his or her expectations”. If the performance falls short of his expectation the Customer is dissatisfied. If the performance exceeds expectations, the Customer is highly satisfied or delighted.

Satisfaction is an ‘overall customer attitude towards a service provider’ (Levesque and McDougall, 2007), or an emotional reaction to the difference between what customers anticipate and what they receive (Woodruff, 2007), regarding the fulfilment of some need, goals or desire (Oliver, 1999).

Customer satisfaction is considered as an important driver for customer loyalty and retention, but customer satisfaction is not always an assurance of customer retention. Customer retention depends also on a number of variables, such as, choice alternatives, prices, and income (Gan et al., 2006). However, it has been proven that there is a linkage between customer loyalty and organizational profitability (Reichheldand Kenny, 2006). This is, as a consequence of a reduction in the cost of retaining a customer and the possibility of achieving a zero defection of profitable customers. However, customer retention should not be taken to mean customer loyalty since other variables may influence retention and loyalty.

Customer loyalty is achieved only when customers have options to choose from. As such service providers should understand why customers choose to stay and should not assume that it is a positive conscious choice (Colgate et al. 2006). This is because; they may be lured away by attractive offers from competitors during periods that they experience incidents that are dissatisfactory (Gronroos, 2007).

Managing Customer Experience for Retention

According to Anderson and Sullivan (2003), "the term 'Customer Experience Management' represents the discipline, methodology and/or process used to comprehensively manage a customer's cross-channel exposure, interaction and transaction with a company, product, brand or service."

Customer retention is about managing the product or service experiences of customers. Customer experiences deserved every marketer’s attention since marketing is a process with no clear end since the post purchase activities cannot be predetermined. Thus,

marketers must constantly find solutions to the experiences of their customers (Gan et al., 2006).

Perhaps mobile phone operators need to rethink their marketing and sales strategies; after all, many experts will tell you that it's five times more profitable to spend marketing and advertising dollars to retain current customers than it is to acquire new customers. In the initial years of Millicom Ghana and in the recent years past the importance of focusing on customer retention was not as important (Gan et al., 2006).

However, there is a solution. Sophisticated technology and database equipment has made it possible for specialized firms to make attempts at customer retention through database marketing programs. Establishing a detailed client database will allow these companies to keep track of personal information and individual preferences of all their customers.

To achieve the objectives of the mobile operators and customer retention programs, the entire campaign should be designed and carried out with the customer in mind. The exercise will only be effective if the customer recognizes and associates some value with being part of your service offering (Marple and Zimmerman, 1999).

Managing Customer Relationship and Customer Retention

Many of the researches conducted on customer retention and customer relationship were observed to have investigated these two phenomena using separate processes without linking the processes together (Colgate et al, 2006). Gan et al. (2006) argued that most banks in the financial services sector choose not to engage in price wars but rather make use of service quality as an effective competitive tool. In this light, Colgate et al (2001) argued that nothing can replace quality service.

Quality service as perceived by the customer has an effect on the perceived value of the service rendered (Gan et al, 2006). The success or failure of generating value is jointly determined by the relationship between the service events; the customer's prior and post perceptions, and perceived and actual quality of delivered service. Woodruff (2007) argues that the concept of customer value suggests a strong link to customer satisfaction.

Siles et al. (2004) argued that though customers have always been reluctant to change banks, impersonal and unfriendly service delivery will drive towards changing banks. In that study, five dimensions of service quality were used. These were convenience, reliability, features and facilities, staffs who deliver the service and other tangible elements. The customer focus concern is about how service quality can be provided to add value. As such customer satisfaction is affected by the perceived service value and vice versa. Colgate et al (2006) demonstrated that customer's perceived value impacts his satisfaction and, they agreed that, there is a linkage between perceived service value and customer satisfaction.

Benefits of Customer Retention

A number of studies have identified the benefits customer retention brings to an organization (Colgate et al, 2006; Reichheld and Kenny, 2006). For example, the longer a customer stays with an organization the more profit the customer generates. This is also the outcome of a number of factors relating to the time the customer spends with the organization, including the higher initial costs of introducing and attracting a new customer; increase in the value of purchases, the customer's better understanding of the organization and the provision of positive word-of-mouth promotion of the organization and its offerings.

It has also been suggested that the costs of customer retention activities are lesser than the costs of acquiring new customers (Rust and Zahorik, 2003). Since customer replacement costs are high, customer defection should be a key performance gauge for senior management and a fundamental component of incentive programmes to retain customers (Zeithaml et al.,

2003). Other researchers suggested that, a customer's longer stay with a firm should not be assumed to be synonymous with his loyalty. According to Stun and Thiry (2005) retained customers do demonstrate immunity from being pulled away by other competitors. For example, a retained customer may not pay attention to a competitors' advertising or even make comparison between the competing ends.

A customer may, however, graduate on the customer's relationship ladder of loyalty. On this ladder, he can graduate from being a client, to supporter and finally becomes a partner. Some of the basic concepts used to explain why customers leave or stay with an organization are customer satisfaction and customer service. All successful companies must learn to retain customers even when the customers appeared satisfied. According to Reicheld and Kenny (2006) some unsatisfied customers may choose not to defect, because they do not expect to receive better service delivery elsewhere.

Relationship between Customer Satisfaction and Customer's Behavioural Intention

Customer satisfaction presumably has a positive effect on consumers' behavioural intentions. Oliver's (1999) cognitive model provides empirical evidence that satisfaction mediates the difference between previous intentions and raised intention to produce a relationship which is stronger than simply the direct effect of previous period intentions on present periods. This evidence would lead to the expectation that satisfaction will lead to higher repurchase intentions. Anderson and Sullivan (2003) found that customer's behavioural intentions to make a purchase were positively influenced by the level of satisfaction their prior experience.

Relationship between Customer Satisfaction and Customer Retention

Chong et al. (2007) found that both customer satisfaction and customer perception of service quality were important in predicting customer loyalty, but satisfaction had the strongest relationship with the loyalty construct. Furthermore, Colgate et al (2006) examined the effect of a relationship approach on overall customer satisfaction and retention. Indeed, they found that service organization employees form particularly close relationship with customers because employees and customers often interact closely together. This was observed to result from situations where services are produced by employees and consumed by customers simultaneously (Lovelock, 2007).

In addition, because of the intangible nature of services, customers often rely on the behaviour of employees in forming their opinion about the service offering (Gronroos, 2007). As a result, employees actually become part of the service offerings in the customers' eyes. Similarly, Anderson and Sullivan (2003) found that customer's repurchase intentions were positively influenced by satisfaction across product categories and that customers were more likely to be retained as they become satisfied. To achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty, Oliver (1999) uphold that all service encounters offer an opportunity to provide superior service quality that will distinguish the firm from its competitors.

Relationship between Consumers' Behavioural Intentions and Customer Retention

A change in the preferences of consumers and their spending pattern influences their choice making behaviour, for example, Beckett et al (2000) found that mobile phone subscribers periodically change their service operators. They switch to other providers because of a change in their lifestyle, such as, social class, location etc. Abratt and Russell (2009) have identified price, trust; service quality and a firm's visibility in times of crisis as the most important criteria used by subscribers in selecting a network provider.

In contrast, Riggall (2000) identified 'convenience' as the most important factor influencing the switching decision of mobile phone customers, followed by their friend's

suggestions, and lower service charges. Lewis (2001) indicated that convenience and recommendation by friends and family were the most decisive mobile operator selection criteria used by customers.

METHODOLOGY

This work is an exploratory one which to Robson (2002) (cited in Saunders, 2007) is a valuable means of finding out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light” This study employs a survey research strategy. The population for this study is the subscribers and employees of Millicom Ghana Limited a mobile phone company in Ghana. Simple random and systematic random sampling technique was employed to select the respondents who were in one way or the other affected or connected to the phenomenon under this study.

The sample size intended for the study is 150 respondents. The researcher was assisted with a list of subscribers based on Tigo numbers in use and employees within the Ayawaso and Okai – koi districts of Accra numbering about 1500. The researcher used convenience sampling to select subscribers due to the difficulty in locating the subscribers.

In addition, systematic random sampling technique of 1/3 or one out of every three employees within the target zone was used to select the employee respondents. In all a total of 150 sample size was selected. However, questionnaires analyzed were reduced to 80. This was done to reduce data. Thus, it is not a census study as it seemed because not all it was not all the data collected that was analysed (Saunders et al, 2007).

The study adopted the mixed method research choices thereby drawing data from both primary and secondary sources. Questionnaire was used as the main primary data capture instrument in addition to secondary data from the Tigo website and other secondary sources

MAIN FINDINGS

Relationship between customer satisfaction and customer’s behavioural intentions

The constructs in the study were captured by a number of items in the questionnaire with each of the item measured on a five point likert scale. For example customer perceived value was captured with questions such as follows;

The question on whether service providers are courteous and friendly enough to meet the consumers’ expectations has overwhelming positive rating for the service provider – Tigo. The overall response was 85 percent for the ‘Yes’ vote with 12 percent responding in the negative and the remaining 3 percent undecided.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The question demanding whether the service provider’s respond in time of need or complaints fast enough? The corresponding answers were not quite different from the responses above. Seventy – two (72) respondents agreed that the service respond to their needs is fast enough representing 87.5 percent.

In a bid to test the high rating of the service provider in the above two questions, the researcher went to find out ratings of specific variables. In this direction, the respondents were asked to rate variables used by the service provider in delivering its customer service programmes such as advertisements, attractive packages, lower SMS rates, quick customer solutions, and perceived service value.

The perception that the value of service people enjoyed greatly influences their level of satisfaction and loyalty is exhibited in the diagram above. From the above diagram, over 70 percent of the respondents

Insert Figure 2 & 3 about here

In Figure 2 and Figure 3, four dimensions of service quality were considered by respondents to be very important by voting for them among a list of others. These service quality dimensions were therefore considered and used in this study. These are convenience, reliability, features and facilities staffs who deliver the service and tangibles. The most important of them all was reliability of the service followed by convenience. These two dimensions were given a very high so much that any mobile phone service provider would have to stop and revise its notes on service quality of their service in Ghana.

In the diagram above, the respondents ranking of the positive influence of perceived service value on customer satisfaction. Available statistics seems to confirm positive relationship the levels of perceived service value and the level of satisfaction. Almost 72.5 percent of respondents agree either strongly or otherwise. The percentage of dissenting respondents is so meagre to prevent one from concluding that a relationship exists between perceived service value and customer satisfaction. This evidence would lead to the expectation that satisfaction will lead to higher repurchase intentions.

Insert Figure 4 about here

A critical consideration of this study is to find out if there is a positive relationship between the levels of perceived service value and customer satisfaction. From the diagram three respondents strongly disagree with the assertion. In total only 7.5 percent of the respondents disagree with the question of a relationship. Thus, over 90 percent of the respondents agreed to the existence of positive linkage between perceived service value and customer satisfaction.

Relationship between customer satisfaction and customer retention

Insert Figure 5 about here

Figure 5 depicts the opinions of the respondents on the favourability of the service provider's (Tigo) customer service to the respondents. Almost about 80 percent of the respondents are of the opinion that Tigo's customer service delivery is actually favourable to them. However, almost 20 percent claimed that the service of Millicom Ghana Limited is not all that favourable.

Insert Figure 6 about here

The rating of the most influential customer service variable relating to subscribers of Tigo recorded the following results. The rating by the respondents depicts a higher range for the general service values delivered by Tigo as against 17.5 percent rating of cheaper call rates. The respondents by this rating exhibit their overall preference for service value as against the cost of the service which scores the highest rating of 70 percent. Perhaps, this would go a long way to commit more resources to customer service value than adverts and a reduction on the communication of cheaper rates of their services.

Insert Figure 7 about here

In a response to a question on most influential factors of customer retention, 65 percent of respondents voted for customer service over the coverage of the network, prestige

of the service provider and advertisements. These data is very special to this study because of the persistent and hustle bustle of the service providers to undo each other through frequent advertisements. Perrhaps, for customer retention, a critical look must be taken on provision of effective service.

Insert Figure 8 about here

The issue of customer service's influence on behavioural intentions is critical to establish whether effective customer service could influence people's intentions to switch a from one service provider to the other or not. The result is overwhelming with almost 80 percent of the respondents agreed that indeed, there behavioural intentions towards a network provider were influenced by the customer service provided by the service provider. Only 6 percent of the respondents were undecided with 15 percent agreeing in the negative.

The above findings are that different from the contribution by Anderson and Sullivan (2003) who found that repurchase intentions were positively influenced by satisfaction across product categories and that customers were more likely to be retained as satisfied.

Insert Figure 9 about here

The behavioural intention of the customers was also focussed on with questions designed to reveal consumers' willingness to switch service provider for perceived deficiency of the provider's service quality. In the above diagram, almost 82 percent of the respondents agreed on the assertion that consumer's behavioural intentions have a considerable influence on their retention. With just about 13 percent of respondents thinking otherwise, it therefore means that to retain ones customers call for changing their behavioural intentions towards such a project.

This result goes to corroborate Chong et al. (2007) found that both customer satisfaction and customer perception of service quality were important predictors of attitude loyalty, but that satisfaction had the strongest relationship with the loyalty construct. Indeed, it was found that service organization employees form particularly close relationship with customers because employees and customers often work together in the creation of many services. This is so where services are produced by employees and consumed by customers simultaneously.

This findings coincide with that of Gronroos (2007) who wrote that because of the intangibility of services, customers often rely on employee's behaviours in forming opinion about the service offering (Gronroos, 2007). As a result, employees actually became part of the service in the customers' eyes.

Relationship between consumers' behavioural intentions and customer retention

The data presented below indicates the relationship between behavioural intentions and customer retention.

Insert Figure 10 about here

Over 60 percent of the respondents agreed that there is an influence. Although about 28 percent of the respondents thought otherwise, it appears the difference between the divide is too wide to be ignored. As such, a positive relationship is established to exist between behavioural intentions and customer intention.

The available data on the type of relationship that exist between customer service and retention is presented in the diagram below

Insert Figure 11 about here

From the diagram, about 75 percent referred to the relationship that exists between customer service and customer retention as a positive one. A clear observation of the diagram shows that the two extreme ends are less than 10 percent. This figure is so infinitesimal that it would not be farfetched to accept that there is a positive correlation between customer service and customer retention. This is consistent with Colgate et al (2006) findings that “retention is achieved only when the customers believe that customer services offered are effective and high”.

CONCLUSION

The lessons of experience up to date provide a ready guide to policy-makers, mobile phone service providers, managers, practitioners, and other interested stakeholders on how to improve upon the process of customer retention.

In all, the research questions were supported indicating strong relationship between customer service, satisfaction and retention within Millicom Ghana limited. The findings in the study show strong support for the application of customer service to enhance customer retention.

It was found that behavioural intentions were positively influenced by the level of satisfaction. Firms with higher customer satisfaction levels tended to have higher customer retention. This conclusion is based on strong evidence in the literature of a relationship between satisfaction levels and behavioural intention and customer retention.

This study has highlighted a number of issues that are useful to aiding managers in the telecommunication market. The issues discussed highlight a number of areas that have been shown to have significant impact for consumers’ retention.

- It is important for managers to identify the needs of the customers and develop appropriate service quality strategies to meet such needs. This is so because this study had shown that there is a strong relationship between customers’ perceived service quality level and customer satisfaction.
- The study has shown that customers’ retention is achieved only when the customers believe that customers’ services offered are effective and higher therefore effort should be made to improve upon the general service value communicated to customers.
- It is also recommended that, the service operator should make their service reliable and convenience to their customers in order to take advantage of customer satisfaction and loyalty which are found to depend to a greater extent on service reliability and convenience.
- The high levels of competition among service providers necessitate adoption of different customer service techniques to satisfy and retain the customer. The effectiveness of the level of customer service will enhance customer retention and reduce switching between and among service providers.

However, a further research will be needed to measure customer satisfaction and also how to uncover the critical factors that might shape behavioural intentions positively toward a product or a brand.

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