CUSTOMER SATISFACTION FOR COMPANY GROWTH: THE ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND SKILLS REQUIRED OF THE SALES FORCE IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *As the competitive environment becomes increasingly fierce, the most important for industry players is nurture and keep loyal customers who will contribute to their long-term growth and profitability. The sales force is involved in the critical business of accomplishing sales objectives and customer satisfaction, which provides the basis for organisational existence and profitability. Given the importance of the salesforce as an organization's primary revenue generator and the principal point of contact with customers, understanding how managers and salespersons in Ghana appreciate their role in the business/customer interface is likely to produce beneficial outcomes. This study explores the roles and responsibilities of the salesforce in delivering customer value and satisfaction. The sample is drawn from Ghana Breweries Limited, a major player in the beer industry in Ghana. Using questionnaires to measure the perceptions of sales managers and salespersons, we find that overall, managers and salespersons perceive their roles, qualities and responsibilities to be relevant for customer satisfaction. Implications of the findings for sales management are drawn.*

KEYWORDS: Salespersons Roles, Qualities, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Value

INTRODUCTION

The political stability in Ghana since 1992 resulted in the liberalisation of the economy, which in turn has impacted favourably on business activities. This has increased the intensity of competition and buyer expectations in general, and the beer industry particularly. As a consequence, there has been an effort by many firms and organisations to nurture and build customer trust and retention, which largely depends on sales force behaviour (Paolo, 2002). As the competitive environment becomes increasingly fierce, the most important for industry players is no longer to provide quality products or services, but also to keep loyal customers who will contribute to their long-term growth and profitability (Kotler, 2009).

However, what are the best practices and strategies for improving sales and customer satisfaction? The sales force is involved in the critical business of accomplishing sales objectives and customer satisfaction, which provides the basis for individual sales persons and organisational existence (Good & Schwepker, 2001). Given the importance of the salesforce as an organization's primary revenue generator and the principal point of contact with customers (Rackham, & DeVincentis, 1999), understanding whether managers and salespersons in Ghana appreciate their role in the business/customer interface is likely to produce beneficial outcomes. Unfortunately, very limited research on this topic from the context of Ghana exists from which decisions on customer management could be based.

This study explores sales force related issues as they apply in the wider world and eventually to apply them in the context of the Ghanaian beer industry. Specifically, from the perspective

of sales managers and sales persons; we explore the roles and responsibilities of the sales force in delivering customer value and satisfaction. In the next to follow, we review literature to put the study in perspective. This is followed by the methods through which data was collected to illuminate the research topic. Then in the concluding part, we present the findings and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Baker, (2001) asserts that the first step in any research project must be to establish what is already known about the topic or problem as knowledge accumulates over time. Furthermore, since knowledge does not exist in a vacuum, this study will only have value if it relates to what other people have written before it (Jankowicz, 1999). To this end, the review begins with an exploration of customer satisfaction for repeat business. This is followed by the roles, qualities and responsibilities of the sales force for delivering on customer satisfaction.

Customer satisfaction

A business exists for only one purpose, i.e. to serve the customer. The customer is the life wire of every business (whether for profit or not) (Drucker, 1999). According to Ellsworth, (2002), the customer is the raison d'être (reason for being) of any organization or company. Also, the success of any business depends on the strength of its brands, which attracts new and existing customers for continuous growth (Bolton, 1998; Grewal, & Sharma, 1991; Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). The importance of customers in a business cannot be overemphasized owing to their impact on business and profitability (Chinomona & Dubihlela, 2014). It is important therefore for organisations to understand customers and their needs in order to tailor their products and services to meet those needs.

A customer (e.g., client, buyer, or purchaser) is the recipient of goods or services from an organization or firm in exchange for money or some other valuable consideration (Blythe, 2008). Customers can be categorized into two (i.e., external and internal) (Kotler, 2001): An external customer is a customer who is not directly connected to the organization/company, but who buys, uses or consumes directly the organization's products or services. On the other hand, an internal customer is directly connected to the organization. Internal customers are usually stakeholders, distributors, employees, or shareholders, and others such as creditors and external regulators (Blythe, 2008). Satisfied customers often make repeat purchases as well as referrals to other people. On the other hand, a customer who suffers through a negative experience with a business, such as being treated rudely by an employee, can also hinder a business by dissuading others from patronizing it (Kotler, 2001).

Understanding therefore the needs of existing customers can lead to increase in their loyalty to the organization and its products, address any potential issues before achieving customer satisfaction targets can be extremely challenging in competitive environments they are tempted to defect, and as well to effectively attract and keep new customers (Fornell et al., 2006). Good customer relationship management can turn happy customers into evangelists for the company's product or service, spreading the word and bringing in new business (Gustaffsson et al., 2006; Kotler & Keller, 2012). Particularly, customer satisfaction holds the potential for increasing an organization's customer base, profitability and reputation (Fornell, 1992). Ensuring customer satisfaction in a business is fundamental.

At the same time, achieving customer satisfaction targets can be extremely challenging in competitive environments. Customers are becoming harder to please, they are smarter, more price conscious, more demanding, less forgiving, and are approached by many more companies with equal or better offers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Moreover, customer expectations are increasing in relation to salesperson knowledge, speed of response, breadth and depth of communication, and customization of information and product/service offerings (Jones, Brown, Zoltners, & Weitz, 2005). But the question to ask is what is customer satisfaction and why is it so Important?

Customer satisfaction is the positive emotional state reached by a customer after purchasing a product or service (Kotler, 1997). Satisfaction typically reflects an emotionally tinted evaluation or judgment that customers make about offerings and marketplace relationships (Blocker et al., 2012). This satisfaction can be based on the customer's experience of both contact with the organization (the "moment of truth") and personal outcomes (CSSP, 2007, p: 6). According to Giese and Cote, (2000) customer satisfaction can be some type of affective, cognitive, and/or conative response based on an evaluation of product-related standards, product consumption experiences, and or purchase-related attributes; expressed before choice, after choice, after consumption, or after an extended experience (p.14). Furthermore, customer are satisfied when they perceive to have received much from a buying experience, and as well when they reach the conclusion that the buying experience was as good as they believed it would be (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

More importantly, satisfied customers are more likely to remain loyal and make future purchases; and are often willing to pay premium prices for those purchases (Fornell et al., 2006). Loyal customers can have higher retention rates, commit a higher share of their spending to the firm, and are more likely to recommend others to become customers of the firm (Reichheld & Earl Sasser, 1990). Whether the buyer is satisfied after a purchase depends on the offer's performance in relationship to the buyer's expectations and whether the buyer interprets any deviations between the two (Tsiros, Mittal, & Ross Jr. 2004). It is therefore important for businesses to monitor customer satisfaction in order to determine how to increase their customer base, loyalty, revenue, profits, and market share (CSSP, 2007).

At the same time, escalating competition and rising buyer expectations have forced many companies to focus on quality to a greater extent than ever before (Wright & Grant, 2001). Many companies today are faced with more powerful and demanding customers necessitating a redesign of products and service delivery (Homburg et al., 2002). The sales force in the organization is commonly held responsible for the acquisition of sales revenue. Specifically, a salesperson's selling orientation-customer orientation can affect not only consumer satisfaction with the salesperson, but indirectly, satisfaction with the product or manufacturer (Goff, B. G., Boles, & Stojack, 1999). In this view, the role and importance of the salesforce in meeting the challenge of creating competitiveness and customer value and satisfaction is critical (Shepherd, 1999).

Roles and responsibilities of the sales force

Companies generate revenue to sustain the organization, for developing and innovating new products, services and offerings in general (Kotler, & Keller, 2012). The importance of sales in all its deferent forms and strategies cannot be overemphasised as it is the most fundamental channel through which money flows into the firm (Malaysian Business, 2002). The salesforce serve as representatives of the firm, with the primary responsibility for explaining

its total effort to customers, and not just pushing products (McCarthy & Perrault, 2003). Marketing organizations often rely on salesperson information to guide decisions (Mullins et al., 2014). Salespersons may also provide information about products, explain and interpret company policies, and even negotiate prices or diagnose technical problems.

Additionally, salespersons represent the customer back inside the selling firm.They are involved in the critical activity of accomplishing sales objectives, which provides the basis for individual (salesperson) and organisational existence (Good & Schwepker, 2001, p: 32). The salesforce is the fulcrum through which companies strive toward these targets; and thus plays a crucial role in determining organizational success (Ingram et al., 2002).

The importance, qualities and roles of the sales person in an organisational setting abound in the literature (e.g., Blocker et al., 2012; Goff et al.,1999; Jobber et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2005; Maycock, & Puplampu, 2014; Möller, 2006; Peterson & Lucas 2001; Rentz et al., 2002; Sharma, 2001; Speier &Venkatesh, 2002). Sharma (2001) underscores the importance of salespersons with the position that they are "the eyes and ears" of the firm, performing a variety of roles such as business communications, resolution of disputes, asset managers, and advocates (p: 44). Also, the firm benefits from sales which is a direct result of the salesforce (Chen, 2000). Salespersons' service behaviors are important in building trust and customer satisfaction, which in turn lead to increases in customer share of market (Ahearne et al., 2007).

According to Sumrall and Sebastianelli (1999), sales people occupy a ''boundary role position'' in the organisation that require them to satisfy persons both inside and outside the firm (p: 72). In most companies sales personnel are the single most important link with the customer (Kotler, & Keller, 2012). The salesforce work at the outer boundary of the organization—at the interface with customers (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005, p: 945). Further, they are the primary source of information exchange within the customer-seller relationship and; thus play a critical role in the formation and sustainability of that process (Speier &Venkatesh, 2002). Sales people are implementers of policy through their every day interactions with customers, and they often face the contradictory directives of generating sales revenue by closing sales and securing customer satisfaction (Boles et al., 2001).

Therefore, the best-designed and best-planned marketing efforts may fail if the salesforce is ineffective (Jobber et al., 2004). It is ultimately the role of the salesforce to translate a company's strategy from the boardroom vision to an everyday reality (Piercy et al., 1999). This board room strategy according to Terho et al. (2014) affects sales performance, and as well salespeople's customer orientation and value-based selling behaviour.

Salesforce behavior can have a significant effect on customer satisfaction (Grewal & Sharma, 2013). Salespersons' relational behaviour (customer orientation and team selling) and institutional treatment (distributive and organizational fairness) can predict customer satisfaction and loyalty (Poujol et al., 2012). Also, customer satisfaction and sales performance is mediated by salespeople's skills related to self-efficacy and adaptability (Ahearne et al., 2005). For example, salespersons' autonomy and self efficacy is positively related to sales performance, customer satisfaction and customer-orientation levels (Pettijohn et al., 2014).

The salesforce serve as representatives of the organization or firm, with the primary responsibility for explaining its total effort to customers, and not just pushing products (McCarthy & Perrault, 2003). The salesperson may provide information about products,

explain and interpret company policies, and even negotiate prices or diagnose technical problems (Perrault & McCarthy (2003). The salesperson also represents the customer back inside the selling firm.The salesforce play the role of persuaders, servicemen, information-gatherers, problem-definers, advocates, information-reporters, co-ordinators, schedulers, display-arrangers, and customer ego-builders (Sharmer, 2001, p: 46). It is also the role of the sales fore to help in recruiting new customers, and well to create the conditions that reduce or prevent customer defection to competitive products or services (Johnson et al., 2001).

In this respect, the duties of sales person's has been proposed by Cooke (1999,p: 80) as follows: a) selling duties (analysing, advising, suggesting, problem solving, demonstrating, persuading)**;** b) calling duties (frequency, purpose, time spent); c) prospecting for customers; d) delivery duties(as a major part of the job or service); d) training duties (other salespeople, service people, dealers, operators; e) merchandising (stock checking, shelf space, display handling complaints, adjustments-usually performed by salespeople in the channel of distribution); f) service duties(trouble-shooting, repairs, maintenance, handling complaints); and g) management (planning and controlling calls-travel, budgets and quotas, reporting on competitors and customers feedback).

Also, in order to achieve their role, sales persons need to have the relevant skills to be able to function in a competitive environment. Rentz et al., (2002) define selling skills as the individual's learned proficiency at performing the necessary tasks of the sales job. This according to the authors consist of three distinct components (p: 13): a) interpersonal skills, such as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflicts; b) salesmanship skills, such as knowing how to make a presentation and how to close a sale; c) technical skills, such as knowledge of product features and benefits, engineering skills, and the procedures required by company policies.

Similarly, Peterson and Lucas (2001 p: 40) propose the following as critical abilities for salespersons: a) expertise abilities (selling skill, knowledge of customer's products and industry); b) contribution abilities (ability to assist customers in reaching their bottom line goals and objectives); c) representation abilities (commitment to the customer's interest, ability to provide objective advice, counsel and assistance); d) trustworthiness (honesty, reliability, consistency in actions and overall ethics); and e) compatibility (match between sales person's interaction style and the personality traits of the customer). Also, salespersons skills that employers consider include communications skills (both oral and written), interpersonal skills (such as listening), and problem solving skills to be among the most important and desirable traits (Mantel et al., 2002 p: 34).

In addition, biologically based traits of good salespersons are optimism, emotional stability, and extraversion (Loveland et al. (2015). According to the authors, extraversion refers to the tendency of an individual to be outgoing, warmhearted, expressive and attention-seeking. According to Randall and Randall (2001), traits salespersons are pleasantness, friendliness, good personality, great personal energy, enthusiasm, drive, patience and perseverance. Furthermore, a sales person who is strong and balanced in the following four traits areas is helpful for delivering on customer satisfaction in organisations (Vignali, 1997 p: 11).

Talent 1:   the ability to close; relationship skills and product knowledge means nothing if the seller cannot ask for a sale.

Talent 2:   intrinsic motivation; this is a powerful internal drive to succeed inherent in all great sales people, and the survey offers intrinsic motivation as that it can be shaped but not taught.

Talent 3:   disciplined work style; great sales people are tenacious about learning every detail about their customer, they have strategies and organised plans.

Talent 4:   ability to build relationships; customers describe top sales people as empathic, responsive, patient, caring, good listeners and honest, and always wanting to add value.

METHODOLOGY

The sample

The sample was drawn from the beer industry made up of two major players in the northern sector of Ghana (i.e., Ghana Breweries Limited (GBL) and Accra Brewery Limited (ABL). These firms together employ close to two hundred and fifty sales persons, some working for Key Account Customers popularly called Depot Contractors. As a result, a sufficient number of perspectives were included so that the measures correspond closely with reality, and also to be able to yield the same results on other occasions (i.e., Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2000).

In this direction, all Key Account Managers (KAM) (N=10) and sixty sales persons were included in the sample. The response rate for managers was 80% (eight managers). The plan for salespersons drawn from all the three northern sales regions was sixty (60). However, the response rate was 93% or fifty-six (56) because some sales persons had taken their annual leave and others were on assignments outside of their sales areas.

Instruments

The study deployed self-administered questionnaires with an important goal of understanding the choices respondents make between alternative courses of action or objects (i.e., Krosnick 1999). Questionnaires are the most usual form of primary research. They can have a wider scope, and are logical, deterministic, and generally parsimonious in use (Baker, 2001, p: 386). Particularly, the literature review enabled some insightful discoveries in terms of the concepts to be measured. In designing the questionnaires along the line of the literature however, suitable concepts were adapted to align the research process (i.e., Geursen, 2000). It was particularly important to adapt the questionnaires to suit respondents because their understanding of the questionnaires was critical to the study.

Data Collection

Zikmund (2000) posits that data collection is crucial as any research is no better than the data collected in the field. To this end, a two-phase approach with managers and sales persons was deployed in data collection. Also, the same questionnaires with the same wording were administered. This ensured that differences between answers (should there be any), are due to real differences between respondents and not artificial (Krosnick 1999.p: 542). Whiles managers were contacted in their offices to provide answers to the

questionnaires; sales persons devoted fifteen minutes of their monthly sales meeting to answer the questionnaires.

The data was double-entered using FoxPro 2.6 (DOS) software. The data generated by FoxPro was converted into State 7.0 format (another software), a statistical package used to accomplish most of the common statistical tasks (Hamilton, 2003). This enabled the presentation of results in the form of tables, graphs and summaries.

Findings

1) Managers

Sales persons roles and qualities in delivering customer satisfaction

Table 1 below presents the results of managers' perceptions about the role of salespersons in delivering customer satisfaction. As can be observed in the table, by a 100% score, managers agreed they consider sales person's roles and qualities as important for delivering satisfaction. On the specifics, 75% and 63% of the managers perceive the representation and selling role of salespersons respectively to be important for customer satisfaction. Significantly, calling on customers on routinely, promotional and customer service were scored 100% each by the managers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Managers' perceptions about the role of salespersons in delivering customer satisfaction

Variable	Frequency Distribution (%)	
Are sales person's roles important for delivering on customer satisfaction?	Yes	8 (100)
	No	0 (0)
	Total	8 (100)
What are these roles?		
Representation	Yes	6 (75)
	No	2 (25)
	Total	8 (100)
Selling	Yes	5 (63)
	No	3 (27)
	Total	8 (100)
Calling on customers on routine basis	Yes	8 (100)
	No	0 (0)
	Total	8 (100)
Delivery	Yes	3 (38)
	No	5 (62)
	Total	8 (100)
Promotional duties	Yes	8(100)
	No	0 (0)
	Total	8 (100)
	No	0 (0)
	Total	8 (100)
Credit	Yes	6 (75)
	No	2 (25)
	Total	8 (100)

Managing	Yes	5 (62.5)
	No	3 (37.5)
	Total	8 (100)

Managers' ratings of sales person roles perceived to have an influence on customer satisfaction

This section presents the results of managers' ratings of sales persons' roles that have potential in creating customer satisfaction. Salespersons' role in facilitating credit to customers, customer service, prompt delivery of goods and service, and promotions were rated as either very important or important. On the other hand, one manager rated calling duties, management, representation, and selling to be of little importance. Figure 1 below presents the results.

Figure 1: Managers' ratings of sales persons' roles
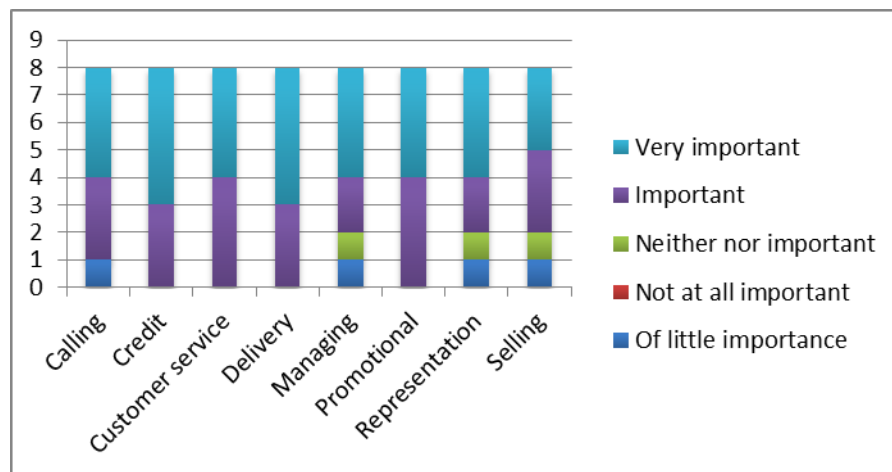
Managers' ratings of salespersons' perceived to have an influence on customer satisfaction

The managers rated salespersons' qualities as follows: four managers rated personality and adaptability as either very important or important for delivering on customer satisfaction. One manager, three managers, and four managers rated salespersons expertise, compatibility, and the ability to play in the team as neither not important, important, and very important for customer satisfaction. On the whole, it appears the managers were largely agreeable of these qualities as requisite for customer satisfaction (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Managers rating on qualities of sales persons
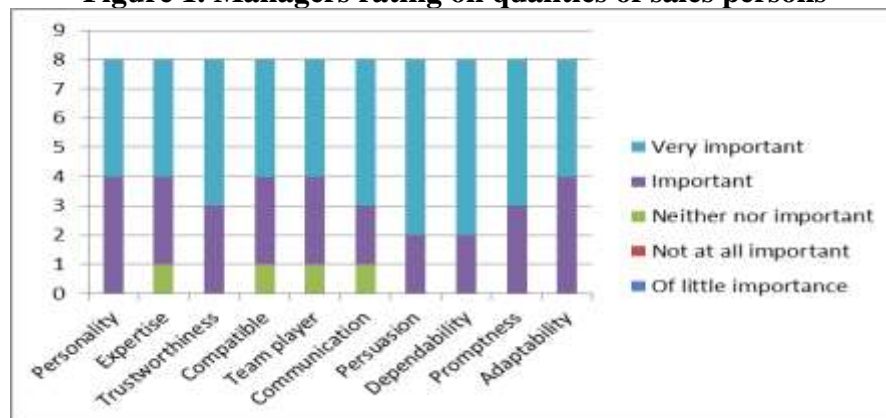
b) Salespersons

Salespersons' perceptions about their roles as related to customer satisfaction

Table 2 below presents salespersons' perceptions about their role in delivering customer satisfaction. As can be observed in the table, all the salespersons (100%) perceive their roles to be relevant for customer satisfaction. For example, 80%, 85%, 88% and 89% of the salespersons perceive the selling role, calling on customers, facilitating credit, and as well rendering various services to customers as important for customer satisfaction.

### Table 2. Salespersons' perceptions about their role in delivering customer satisfaction

Variable		Frequency distribution (%)
Did you know that you have a role in delivering customer satisfaction?	Yes	56 (100)
	No	0 (0)
	Total	56 (100)
Which of these roles do you perceive to contribute to customer satisfaction?		
Selling	Yes	45 (80)
	No	11 (20)
	Total	56 (100)
Calling	Yes	48 (85)
	No	8 (25)
	Total	56 (100)
Prospecting	Yes	30 (54)
	No	26 (46)
	Total	56 (100)
Delivery	Yes	46 (82)
	No	10 (18)
	Total	56 (100)
Merchandising	Yes	32 (57)
	No	24 (43)
	Total	56 (100)
Customer Service	Yes	50 (89)
	No	6 (11)
	Total	56 (100)

	Yes	49 (88)
Credit	No	7 (12)
	Total	56 (100)

Salespersons' ratings of their roles in customer satisfaction

In Figure 3 below, we present results of salespersons ratings of their qualities that in their view can lead to customer satisfaction.

Figure 2. Salespersons' ratings of their qualities in relation to customer satisfaction
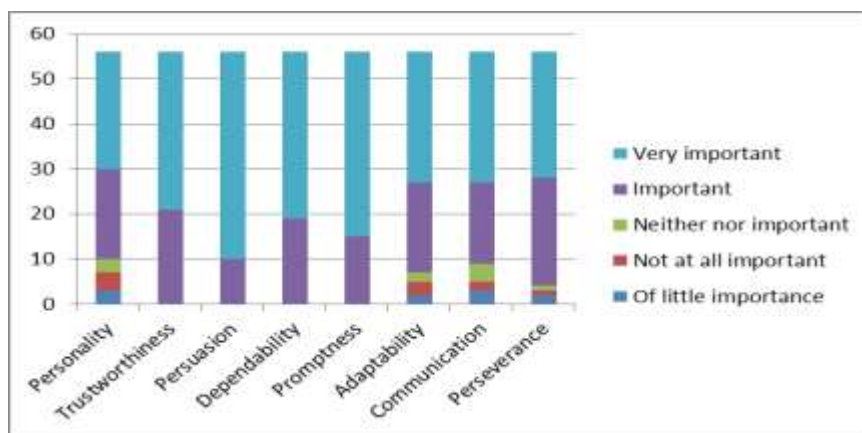
As can be observed in the figure, majority of the salespersons rate the qualities as important or very important for customer satisfaction. For example, 36, 46, 37 and 41 of the salespersons rated trustworthiness, persuasive skills, being dependable, and promptness with customer needs as very important for customer satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that sales managers and the force in the Ghana beer industry recognize the importance of the roles and responsibilities of salespersons for delivering customer satisfaction (see Table 1). For example, majority of the managers and salespersons perceive the representation and selling role of salespersons respectively to be important for customer satisfaction. They also rated salespersons' role in facilitating credit to customers, customer service, prompt delivery of goods and service, and promotions to be very important for customer satisfaction. The findings are consistent with previous studies mostly drawn from the developed country context (e.g., Ellegaard et al., 2014, Goff et al., 1999; Guenzi, & Troilo, 2006; Hohenschwert, 2012; Möller, 2006; Mwangulu, 2014; Pettijohn et al., 2014; Sharma, 2001).

Singh and Das (2013) reported that experienced salespersons have better performance in customer-oriented selling, and that more experienced salespersons' performance is better explained using job satisfaction and customer oriented selling rather than their adaptive selling behaviors. Also, Vlachos et al. (2008) found that egoistic-driven motives

negatively influence salesperson trust in a company, whereas stakeholder and values-driven motives positively influence salesperson trust. They also reported that salesforce attributions and outcomes are mediated by trust relationship.

Similar findings have been reported from the context of the Ghanaian industry. For example, Mahmoud (2011) reported that the development of market orientation rests more on the attitude of owners/managers, which leads to superior performance under ceaseless competitive conditions (see also Preko et al., 2014). Similarly, Addae-Boateng et al. (2013) reported that problems faced by resellers in the Ghanaian FMCG sector include customers' reluctance to accept new products, the general difficulty in retrieving money owed by clients. And that firms that are able to employ the right salespeople with the right qualities and strategies can achieve high sales and market growth.

CONCLUSION

Although firms rely heavily on the efforts of salespersons for their growth and profitability our understanding of salespeople's roles and qualities from the perspective of Ghana is still limited. In most companies sales personnel are the single most important link with the customer (Kotler, & Keller, 2012). They serve as representatives of the firm, with the primary responsibility for explaining its total effort to customers (McCarthy & Perrault, 2003). Salesforce behavior can have a significant effect on customer satisfaction (Grewal & Sharma, 2013).

In this respect, this study explored the role, qualities and responsibilities of the salesforce in delivering customer satisfaction from the perspective of sales managers and salespersons in the Ghanaian beer industry. In line with the literature, the managers and salespersons rated salespersons' qualities and roles as important for delivering on customer satisfaction. It turned out that majority of the respondents perceive salespersons roles and responsibilities to be largely important for customer satisfaction. It was expected that understanding whether managers and salespersons appreciate their role in the business/customer interface will generate context specific data for improving customer satisfaction

The results have practical relevance for sales management. First, when recruiting new sales representatives, management should critically take into consideration the candidate's level of qualities and traits. For example, dominance behavior in a sales situation has implications for salespersons in their work relations and especially with customer interaction (i.e., Evanschitzky et al., 2012). According to Evanschitzky and colleagues, since dominance is a trait-like characteristic, it is difficult to change by sales training in the short-term. Therefore, assessing the level of dominance may be important to consider as an additional selection criterion for new sales representatives.

Also, top performing salespeople are attracted to organizations that provide opportunities to make full use of their abilities. Helping salespeople perform better and reducing turnover among top salespeople are two important issues faced by management (Jaramillo et al., (2012). Therefore, sales training should focus on improving each individual salesperson's ability to better understand the customer's needs, desires, and expectations. The value of selling skills, company information, and behavioral training topics can also be valuable (Attia &Honeycutt Jr, 2012; Pettijohn et al., 2014). This can enable salespersons to adapt their

selling approaches based on the understanding of customer needs; and which can ultimately lead to the benefit of the firm.

Our study is however without limitations. Therefore, caution should be used in drawing conclusions from this study. According to Mullins et al. (2014), in relying on salespeople's subjective perceptions, firms may face some risk when these perceptions do not accurately reflect their customer relationships. Further research could benefit from investigating customer satisfaction factors from the view point of the users, buyers or customers themselves. Also, it will be important to determine if the customer satisfaction indicators (be they derived from salespersons or the customers themselves) have an impact on sales performance in quantitative terms.

Acknowledgement

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