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FACTORS INFLUENCING CUSTOMER LOYALTY TO FAMILY BUSINESSES IN THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

Abstract:

In today's competitive business environment, ensuring customer loyalty and the building and maintaining of relationships with customers is important to all businesses, especially family businesses. In South Africa approximately 80% of all businesses have family ownership involvement and more than 60% of all listed companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Ltd are family businesses. In South Africa. Family businesses are in a unique position to leverage relationship building into a sustainable competitive advantage associated with positive customer referrals, repeat purchases and ultimately, increased profitability.

Despite the benefits of building customer relationships, South African businesses are known for poor customer service. Additionally, limited research exists investigating customer loyalty in South African family businesses. Therefore, this paper investigates the factors influencing customer loyalty of family businesses in the Eastern Cape, South African.

The sample consisted of customers that purchased a product or service from a family businesses that operate in the boundaries of the Eastern Cape. The statistical analysis was undertaken on 194 usable questionnaires. Factor analysis was undertaken and Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument. Multiple regression analysis was utilised to investigate the relationships between the independent variables in this study, namely: Trust, Commitment, Two way communication and Conflict handling and the dependent variable Customer loyalty. The empirical findings revealed that Trust, Commitment and Two way communication have a positive significant influence on Customer loyalty. Finally, recommendations based on the findings of the study, are presented to family businesses owners/managers.

Keywords:

Customer loyalty; family business; customer-relationship management

Introduction

Firms that are family owned dominate the economic landscape worldwide, with more than 60 percent of all firms in most nations being classified as family businesses (Chrisman, Chua and Steier, 2005). Carrigan and Buckley (2008, p.656) suggest that family owned businesses have unique characteristics (governance, ownership, management and the vision of the business) which facilitates building relationships with its customers and stakeholders. Family owned and operated businesses can provide and maintain superior customer relationships, which afford family businesses competitive advantages which are associated with customer loyalty, perceptions of trustworthiness and goodwill (Orth and Green, 2008, p.248). Carrigan and Buckley (2008, p.656) point out that family owned businesses focus on delivering excellent customer service, yet limited research has been done on family businesses customer services abilities and how they are perceived by their customers. This paper will focus on investigating the four factors identified by Ndubisi (2007, p.101) and Roberts-Lombard and Du Plessis (2012, p.155) for the South African context and investigate if Trust, Commitment, Two way communication and Conflict handing influence the loyalty of customers to family businesses in the Eastern Cape (South Africa).

Theoretical background

The nature and distinctiveness of the family business

A family business can be defined as business where one family controls the business by having a majority of the ordinary voting shares, the family is represented on the management team and the leading representative of the family perceives the business to be a family firm (Naldi, Nordqvist, Sjöberg and Wiklund, 2007, p.35). Poza (2010, p.6) elaborates further and defines a family business as a unique synthesis of the following: ownership control (15 percent or more) by two or more members of a family, strategic influence by family members on the management of the firm, concern for family relationships and having the dream of continuing the business across generations.

According to Poza (2010, p.6) four characteristics are at the heart of a family businesses distinctiveness, namely: the presence of the family, the overlap between family, management and ownership, the competitive advantage gained from family unity and finally the owner's dream of keeping the business in the family. This distinctiveness of the family business through the family's ownership of a business provide the building blocks in developing customer relationships (Carrigan and Buckley, 2008, p.657). Carrigan and Buckley (2008, p.657) and Murphy, Laczniak and Wood (2007) emphases that relationships between a business and a customer are established, reinforced and sustained through the principles of trust, commitment and diligence.

Customer relationship management

Customer relationship management (CRM) at an organisational level can be defined as the building and managing of customer relationships through understanding and anticipating customer's needs (Du Plessis and Boon, 2004, p.76). Whereas Berndt, Herbst and Roux (2005, p.81), define CRM as the development and maintenance of long term mutually beneficial relationships with customers. CRM focuses on building learning relationships with customers and developing a loyal customer base, through maintaining relationships (Berndt and Tait, 2014, p.23).

The four underpinning factors of customer loyalty

Trust

Trust can be defined as the belief that one party will perform actions that will result in a positive outcome for the other party as well as one party not taking actions that will result in negative outcomes (Roberts-Lombard and Du Plessis, 2012, p.156). Whereas Orth and Green (2009, p.249) define trust as the expectation that is held by the consumer that the business is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on promises that are made to the customer. Trust in a business is based on the ability of that business to provide a customer with recurring, dependable exchanges and living up to the customers expected behaviour (Van Vuuren, Roberts-Lombard and Van Tonder, 2012, p.82). Trust implies that there is a certain amount of expectation and confidence in another party's behaviour, and family businesses are in the unique position to leverage this implied trust into a competitive advantage (Cooper, Upton and Seaman, 2005). Furthermore Van Vuuren *et al.* (2012, p.81) found that higher levels of trust and commitment can lead to higher levels of customer loyalty which could ultimately lead to higher profitability.

Commitment

Commitment can be defined as the intention to continue a course of action or activity (Rauyruen, Miller and Barrett, 2005, p.3). Whereas Van Vuuren *et al.* (2012, p.86) define commitment as a psychological sentiment that a person has in their mind through which an attitude concerning the continuation of a relationship with a business partner is formed. Roberts-Lombard and Du Plessis (2012, p.156) highlight that commitment to a business is established through shared values and the belief that the business will be difficult to replace. Commitment is a vital component for a business to establish successful relationships (Berndt and Tait, 2014, p.29). Rauyruen *et al.* (2005, p.4) highlight the fact that customers that have a high level of commitment to a product or service would buy more of that item. Relationship quality and commitment are seen as antecedents for a customer to have repeat purchase behaviour (Hur, Park and Kim, 2010; Van Vuuren *et al.,* 2012, p.86).

Family businesses have been recognised for their strong commitment to quality, the family name, traditions, values and the businesses customers (Tomlinson, 2012). Family businesses commitment to its customers come from many customers being friends of the family first, which then eventually spill over in the sale of a product or

service (Tomlinson, 2012). The presence of commitment in a relationship between the family business and the customer implies that both parties will be loyal, reliable and show stability in the relationship with one another (Berndt and Tait, 2014, p.30).

Two way communication

According to Andersen (2001, p.168) communication is defined as the act of transferring a message from one person to another and making the message be understood in a meaningful way. Communication is about more than just communicating a message to a customer but also needs to allow for an understanding between the parties involved in order for the communication to be effective (Rootman, 2011, p.185). It is therefore important that two-way communication takes place in a business's CRM, because customers will have a platform to be heard and not just be promoted to as in the case of one-way communication (Du Plessis and Roberts-Lombard, 2013, p.3).

Communication in a family business is especially important because of the family dimension, with the family business focusing on communicating the family mission, vision, values, and ethical principles in their communication messages to their customers (Tharawat Magazine, 2016). Communicating to a firm's customers with timely and trustworthy information on product/service as well as communicating proactively if a delivery problem occurs, is at the heart of effective communication (Ndubisi, 2007, p.100). When there is effective communication which is successful between the firm and its customers, a better relationship will result and customers are more likely to be loyal to the firm (Ball, Coelho and Machás, 2004, p.1272; Lo, 2012, p.93; Ndubisi, 2007, p.100).

Conflict handling

Du Plessis and Roberts-Lombard (2013, p.3) explain that conflict handing includes the ability of a business to avoid potential conflict situations, taking proactive steps to ensure conflict does not manifest and the ability to debate solutions to problems through providing an open platform for discussions. Ndubisi (2007, p.100) indicates that depending on how well a business is able to avoid, solve and discuss a solution to a problem, will determine whether the customer is loyal or not to the business. Ndubisi and Chan (2005) found that a significant relationship exists between conflict handling and customer loyalty. In terms of family businesses, the family norms for resolving conflict will set the tone for conflict management in the business (Sorenson, 1999, p.325). Furthermore the owner of the business usually will establish norms for the business, which will include how decisions will be made and how conflicts in the business will be resolved (Sorenson, 1999, p.325).

Customer loyalty

Kim, Vogt and Knutson (2015, p.175) define customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to a business to rebuy a preferred product or service consistently in the future. Customer loyalty can also been seen as an attitude held by a consumer to continue a relationship based on past experience (Soh, Chin and Wong, 2015, p.215).

The advantages of a business having customer loyalty are numerous, and include, regular customers frequently visiting the business, loyal customers are willing to pay premium prices, loyal customers refer new clients to the business and finally having loyal customers make it difficult for competitors to enter the market or to increase their market share (Du Plessis, 2010, p.63; Van Vuuren *et al.*, 2012, p.82).

Numerous authors (Carrigan and Buckley, 2008, p.657; Cooper *et al.,* 2005, p.665) suggest that family businesses can create superior customer relationships due to the customer loyalty, perceptions of trustworthiness and the goodwill of customers. Furthermore Cooper *et al.* (2005) and Carrigan and Buckley (2008, p.657) found that relationships are at the heart of family businesses, with customers having the ability to deal directly with the family in charge and knowing the person whose name is on the door, promote customer loyalty to family businesses.

Research hypotheses

Against this theoretical background, the following hypotheses are subject to empirical testing in this study and are depicted in Figure 1:
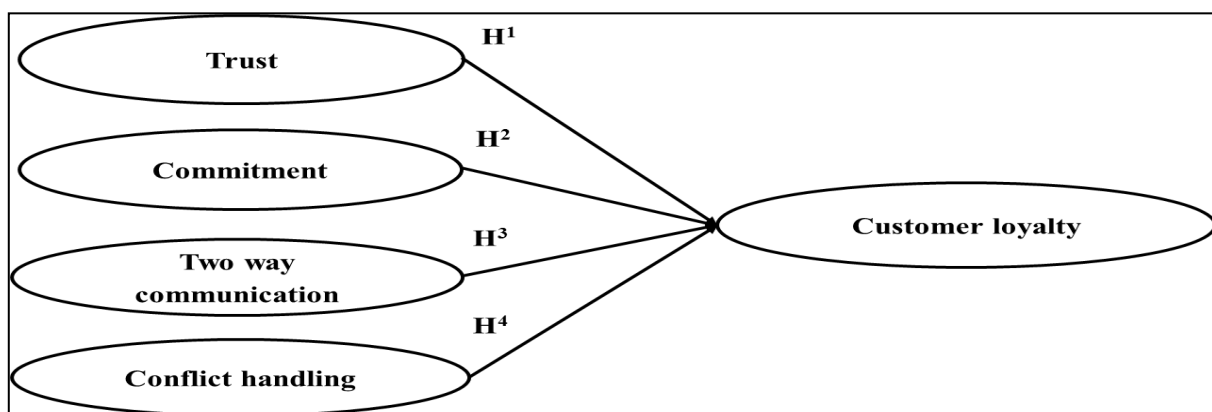

Figure 1: Hypothesised model

Source: Ndubisi (2007, p.101); Roberts-Lombard and Du Plessis (2012, p.155)

H^1:   There is a positive relationship between *Trust* and *Customer loyalty* to the family business.

H^2 There is a positive relationship between *Commitment* and *Customer loyalty* to the family business.

H^3:   There is a positive relationship between *Two way communication* and *Customer loyalty* to the family business.

H^4:   There is a positive relationship between *Conflict handling* and *Customer loyalty* to the family business.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopted a positivist research paradigm which followed a quantitative research approach. Collis and Hussey (2014, p.43) describe positivism as a paradigm based on the assumption that social reality is singular and objective and is not affected by the act of investigating it. In terms of a quantitative research approach it focuses on explaining phenomena through the collection of numerical data which can be analysed through the use of statistics (Aliaga and Gunderson, 1999).

Population and sampling

The population that was under investigation in this study consisted of all consumers who had purchased from a family business in 2015 that was operating within the borders of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. For the purpose of this study, a family business refers to a business where at least two members of a family work in the business and the family owns more than a 50 percent share in the business.

In order to identify potential respondents, snowball sampling was utilised. Wegner (2007, p.215) explains that snowball sampling makes use of each identified member of the target population to identify another sampling units in the target population. Snowball sampling was used in this study because there is no family business database in South Africa or the Eastern Cape (Farrington, 2009; Van der Merwe, 2010, p.300). The sample size for this study comprised of 203 family businesses consumers of which 194 were usable for statistical analysis.

Measuring instrument and data collection

The primary method of data collection in this study was through a self-administrated structured questionnaire. The measuring instrument consisted of a cover letter and two sections. The cover letter indicated the topic of the study, the objective of this study and set out the parameters of what a family business would be for this study, to ensure that the correct sample was drawn. The questionnaire was administered to a consumer that had purchased either a product or a service from a family business in the Eastern Cape in the year 2015.

Section A of the questionnaire requested the respondent's demographic information pertaining to their gender, age, ethnicity, years of employment, level of education and monthly income. Section B of the questionnaire consisted of 39 randomized statements (items) which focused on assessing the respondent's loyalty to a family business by making use of a five point Likert-scale, where the respondent was requested to indicate the extent of their agreement with each statement. The five point Likert scale was denoted as 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 *strongly agree.*

The study, along with the measuring instrument, was subject to ethics approval procedures at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and as part of this procedure all respondents were assured of their anonymity during the study. After the questionnaires had been completed by the respondents the data was entered onto an

Excel spread sheet and examined for missing data. Respondents who had missing data were omitted from the study.

Data analysis

The data that was collected from the measuring instrument was analysed and the validity and reliability of the measuring instrument was assessed. Tests for uni-dimensionality (using factor analysis) were undertaken on the independent variables (*Trust, Commitment, Two way communication* and *Conflict handling*) and the dependent variable (*Customer loyalty*) because the constructs are well recognised in the literature (see Table 1).

Table 1: Measuring instrument items

Independent variables	Items	References
Trust	9	Aydin and Özer, 2005, p.917; Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007, p.850; Lawson-Body, Willoughby and Logossah, 2010, p.7.
Commitment	8	Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007, p.850; Krüger and Rootman, 2010; Walter, Mueller and Helfert, 2002.
Two way communication	6	Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007, p.850; Rootman, 2011.
Conflict handling	8	De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta, 2001; Nyameino, Bonuke and Cheruiyot, 2015, p.1001.
Dependent variable	**Items**	**References**
Customer loyalty	8	Aydin and Özer, 2005, p.917; Homburg and Giering, 2001; Mohsan, Nawaz, Khan, Shaukat and Aslam, 2011, p.270.

Source: Authors' own construction

Factor loadings of 0.5 or greater were considered significant for this study (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2014, p.115). Cronbach's alpha coefficients (CAs) were utilised to assess the reliability of the measuring instrument, coefficients of 0.70 or higher were regarded as evidence of sufficient proof of reliability (Hair *et al.,* 2014, p.123). Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise the sample data and Pearson's product moment correlations were done to establish the correlations between the factors under investigation in this study. Thereafter, a multiple regression analyses was undertaken to investigate if the relationships existed between the independent variables (*Trust, Commitment, Two way communication* and *Conflict handling*) and the dependent variable (*Customer loyalty*). In conducting the statistical analyses, the software programme STATISTICA version 13 was utilised.

Empirical results

Demographic profile of respondents

There was a near equal amount of male (50.52%) as female (49.48%) respondents that participated in this study. The majority of respondents were in the age category 20 to 29 years (42.78%), followed by respondents that were between the ages of 40 to 49

years (15.46%). Most of the respondents were White (49.48%), followed by Black (30.41%). The vast majority of the respondents had been employed between 0-5 years (46.91%). In terms of the level of education, most respondents had a matric certificate (31.96%). Most respondents earned a monthly income between R0-R5000 (29.90%).

Results of the validity and reliability assessments

The tests for uni-dimensionality indicated that the items measuring the independent variables (*Trust, Commitment, Two way communication* and *Conflict handling*) and dependent variable (*Customer loyalty*) loaded as expected and had factor loadings of 0.5 or greater (Hair *et al.,* 2014, p.115). The factor loadings for the independent variables are as follows: *Trust* (0.807-0.574), *Commitment* (0.785-0.639), *Two way communication* (0.711-0.578) and *Conflict handling* (0.776-0.523). For the dependent variable *Customer loyalty*, the factor loadings ranged between 0.837-0.502. The results of the reliability assessments as well as the operationalisation of the independent variables and dependent variable are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability results and operationalisation

Factor	Operationalisation	CAs
Trust	Is the belief that the business can be relied on, meets the needs of customers, keeps its promises and is honest.	0.873
Commitment	Relates to the family business putting the long-term cooperation with their customer before their short-term profit and in so doing making their consumers feel proud, important, take enjoyment from and feel involved with the family business.	0.861
Two way communication	Refers to providing the customer with clear information, regular communication, being available to answer queries and informing the customer if there is a problem with the product/service.	0.707
Conflict handling	Refers to trying to avoid potential conflict with its customers, openly discuss solutions through trying to solve conflicts before problems are created and allowing for mechanisms and a style of solving disagreements that customers are happy with.	0.844
Customer loyalty	Refers to the intention of the customer to make regular purchases from the business in the future, says positive things about the business to other people even if other businesses are cheaper.	0.852

Source: Authors' own construction

All of the independent variables and dependent variable reported CAs of 0.70 or greater thereby providing satisfactory evidence of reliability for the measuring scales of the dependent and independent variables (Hair *et al.,* 2014, p.123).

Descriptive statistics

In this study the descriptive statistics for the independent and dependant variables included the mean scores, standard deviation and frequency distributions are reported in Table 3. Response categories on the 5-point Likert scale for both the independent and the dependent variables were categorised as follows: responses from 1>=x<2.333

were categorised as *disagree*; between 2.333>=x<3.667 were categorised as *neutral;* and between 3.667>=x<=5.000 were categorised as *agree.*

Table 3: Descriptive statistics (n=194)

Factor	Mean	Std Dev	Disagree%	Neutral%	Agree%
Trust	4.034	0.531	0.00	22.68	77.32
Commitment	3.961	0.512	0.52	37.11	62.37
Two way communication	3.753	0.556	0.52	49.48	50.00
Conflict handling	3.886	0.594	0.00	28.87	71.13
Customer loyalty	3.988	0.562	1.03	26.29	72.68

Source: Authors' own construction

As can been seen in Table 3, *Trust* returned the highest mean score ($\bar{x}$ = 4.034), followed by *Commitment* ($\bar{x}$ = 3.961). *Customer loyalty* returned a mean score of 3.988, indicating that the majority of customers agree that they are loyal to their respective family business.

Correlation coefficients

Pearson's product moment correlations were calculated and are reported in Table 4. It can be seen that significant ($p<0.05$) and positive correlations are reported between all the independent variables (*Trust, Commitment, Two way communication* and *Conflict handling*) and the dependent variable, *Customer loyalty* (see Table 4).

Table 4: Correlations coefficients

Factors		1	2	3	4	5
		Trust	Commitment	Two way communication	Conflict handling	Customer loyalty
1	Trust	1.000	-	-	-	-
2	Commitment	0.795	1.000	-	-	-
3	Two way communication	0.587	0.594	1.000	-	-
4	Conflict handling	0.721	0.723	0.638	1.000	-
5	Customer loyalty	0.757	0.785	0.653	0.620	1.000

Source: Authors' own construction

(p<0.05)

Multiple regression analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to assess whether the four factors that underpin customer loyalty, namely: *Trust, Commitment, Two way communication* and *Conflict handling* exert a significant influence on the dependent variable *Customer loyalty* (see Table 5).

Table 5: Regression analyses

Dependent variable: Customer loyalty			R-square = 0.702
Independent variables	**Beta**	**t-value**	**p-value**
Trust	**0.337**	**4.536**	**0.000***
Commitment	**0.4235**	**6.334**	**0.000***
Two way communication	**0.2671**	**4.935**	**0.000***
Conflict handling	-0.1126	-1.585	0.115

Source: Authors' own construction

(*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001)

Significant (p<0.001) and positive relationships were reported between three of the factors, namely: *Trust, Commitment* and *Two way communication* and *Customer Loyalty* (see Table 5). It can also been seen that the factor, *Conflict handling* reported no significant relationship with the dependent variable *Customer loyalty*. Therefore, the factor *Conflict handling* is perceived by customers of family businesses to have no influence on their customer loyalty. Against this background, hypotheses H^1, H^2 and H^3 were accepted, while support for the hypotheses H^4 was not found.

Managerial implications and recommendations

It is evident that the main factors influencing *Customer loyalty* to Eastern Cape family businesses are *Trust, Commitment* and *Two way communication*. Therefore, these factors should be the focus areas for family business owners/managers when aiming to improve *Customer loyalty*. Family business owners/managers need to focus on maintaining and improving *Trust* with their customers through being consistent. Ensuring that the family business is constantly delivering a product or service that meets the customer expectations is vital in developing *Trust*. In achieving this consistency family business owners and managers need to ensure that they go "beyond the call of duty" to try and meet the needs of their customers. Furthermore, the family business owner/manager should always be honest and transparent with the customer in order to build on the level of *Trust* between the family business and the customer.

In order to build consumer *Commitment,* family business owners/managers need to consult with their customers, identify their needs and ensure that these needs are met. In doing so, ensuring that their customers' expectations of the business are met and the products or services required can be provided. In terms of *Two way communication*, it is recommended that family business owners/managers inform customers of new products/services offered or if there is a problem with the products/services they require. Furthermore the family business must ensure that the feedback received from their customers are implemented in such a way that customers can see their suggestions have been incorporated in the product/service

offerings. Social media is anther useful tool that can be utilised by family business owners/managers to create a dialogue between the business and the customers.

Conclusions, limitations and guidelines for future research

The primary objective of the paper was to investigate the factors influencing *Customer loyalty*. The empirical results indicate that three of the independent variables (*Trust, Commitment* and *Two way communication*) were identified as significant factors which influence *Customer loyalty* to Eastern Cape family businesses. Some limitations were encountered during this study, among them was the sampling technique. The snowball sampling method employed proved to be a limitation. This is due to its disadvantages of potential sampling bias and producing a sample that is not representative of the population. This study was mainly focused on the customers of family businesses in the Nelson Mandela Bay area in South Africa, and as a result the study may contain information and results that are relevant for this particular area only. Consequently, the national perceptions of customer loyalty in family businesses could not be measured. This paper only investigated four factors influencing customer loyalty. The researchers acknowledge that other factors that could have had an influence on customer loyalty, were not under investigation in this paper.

As this study has been dedicated to determining the factors influencing customer loyalty in family businesses, future studies can study the factors influence of customer loyalty in comparison to a non-family owned enterprise. In addition, this study can potentially be replicated to focus on another area in South Africa. Alternatively, future studies can study how customer loyalty differs in relation to various industries, such as the services, retail or the financial industry. Despite the limitations, this study has added to the body of knowledge concerning customer loyalty in Eastern Cape family businesses by investigating the influence of the identified variables on customer loyalty. This study may help family business owners/managers to establish or improve upon the factors underpinning customer loyalty, so that the businesses can reap the benefits of having loyal customers.

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