



AN EXPLORATION ON THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CRM BY TELECOM EXPERTS:

EVIDENCE FROM THE NIGERIAN TELECOMS INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Context: Part of the greatest challenge facing modern organisations especially telecom organisations is responding to dynamic customers' needs and building relationship in view of gaining customers' trust and satisfaction within a very competitive market. Hence the aim of this study is to explore how social CRM is being approached by telecom organisations in Nigeria; a very fast developing telecom and technology market.

Design and Subjects: An exploratory research involving a semi-structure interview with 9-industry experts from the Nigerian Telecom industry. Three employees each from three of the leading telecom experts were recruited for the study.

Results: A thematic analysis process was adopted in identifying similarities and differences across the interview data. Themes relating to industry's to customer orientation approach; adoption and implementation of social media technology, social CRM capabilities of the firms, social CRM implementation strategies being implemented by the organisations and the

perceived benefits of social CRM in the local market.

Conclusion: Implementing social CRM offers a lot of benefits for Nigeria telecom firms including improving strategies for acquiring customer information; attracting new customers and keeping the older ones and in general influencing improvement in the telecom service delivery and customer perception and acceptance of such services

INTRODUCTION

Today's business environment has undergone fundamental changes – becoming more of a service-oriented market as against a production-based market that was striving in few decades' past. This has resulted in a shift from a traditional product-focused approach to a more technology-enabled and customer-centric approach (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001; Brooks *et al.* 2011; Patil & Bhakkad, 2014). In this modern era marketing processes have transcended the simple development, supply and sales of goods or services, to the continuous development of after sales services tailored towards developing long lasting relationship with customers (Phan & Vogel, 2010; Peppers & Rogers, 2011; Rai, 2013).



The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has also created new channels for organisations like never before in terms of exploiting customer relationship in view of enhancing customer satisfaction, developing and managing long-term customer relationships, increasing potential sales, and retaining loyal customer (Korsakiene, 2009; Phan & Vogel, 2010). Particularly, the internet and social media have enabled customer relationship management (CRM) practices to flourish. Business organisations can now incorporate the functionalities of the internet and social media into traditional CRM systems to provide a platform where the firms can interact and engage with the consumers (both existing and prospective) in view of providing customized and personalized services (Greenberg, 2010; Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010).

Although the use of Social CRM systems has become prominent across different business industries including the aviation industry (Gajic *et al.* 2016; Gnanprakash & Kulkarni, 2016), hospitality industry (Milovic, 2012; Mohammed, 2012; Rosman & Stuhura, 2013; Thryambakam & Bethapudi, 2013; Klutse, 2016), and telecoms (Cottman, 2013; Saleh, 2016), there are major concerns on the fruition of these Social CRM systems in terms of delivering value both for the organisation and the different stakeholders (Cottman, 2013; Alamgir & Shamsuddoha, 2015). Other authors have raised the question whether the organisations claiming to implement Social CRM are fully exploiting the capabilities of the Social CRM systems and

are embracing the possibilities it offers for their businesses (Alamgir & Shamsuddoha, 2015).

The basic question addressed in this paper relates to the extent which Nigerian telecom service providers have embraced Social CRM as a tool for interacting and engaging with their consumers. And secondly what are the social CRM tools and strategies used by Nigerian telecom service providers. The main goal of the study is to contribute to the larger successfulness of organizations that decide for the social CRM implementation, and to point out to the problems that may be hindering the implementation. This paper is organised as follows: first the concept of social CRM is described by presenting some definitions, Social CRM implementation studies and a review of some of the recent studies in the extant literature. Thereafter, the research methodology is presented, which leads to the presentation of the findings, its discussion and the conclusion reached.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the highly competitive nature of modern business environments, organisations are putting in greater effort in building and establishing lasting relationship with the hope of realising customer loyalty – which has become the bane of modern business and organisational success (O'Brien *et al.* 2015; Faed *et al.* 2016; Ngo & Nguyen, 2016). Therefore, understanding how to manage lasting relationship with profitable customers has become an important research area for



both academicians and practitioners in recent years. Social Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been advanced from the relationship marketing literature as a prominent technique for enhancing customer satisfaction and subsequent retention (Reinartz *et al.*, 2004; Reimann *et al.* 2010; Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012; Wang & Feng, 2012; Nwankwo & Ajemunigbohun, 2013). Simply put, Social CRM can be described as a technology-based solution designed to support the building process and management of the organisation-customer relationship (Jayachandran *et al.* 2005).

Social CRM therefore represents an avenue for businesses to identify and connect with the best customers at the right time and create differentiable value to the customers by satisfying their individual needs and requirements and with the view of stimulating positive customer outcomes such as repeat purchase and brand loyalty (Nguyen & Mutum, 2012). Social CRM therefore requires the reviewing or restructuring of the entire organisational process; whether it is a product or a service driven organization or whether it involves the process of operations from suppliers through to the end application, from their internal staff through to the end customers, including the collection of the different activities such as identification, acquisition and retention of customers through customer interaction management capabilities (Hansotia, 2002; Reinartz *et al.*, 2004; Ernst *et al.* 2011).

Similarly, Ernst *et al.* (2011) describe Social CRM to involve the evolution and integration of marketing ideas and newly available data, technologies and organisational forms into establishing, developing and maintaining successful long-term learning relationships with well-chosen customers. A process that demands the systematic and proactive management of the relationship between the buyer and seller as it progresses from the initiating stage to the maintenance stage and climaxing at the termination phase if need be (Reinartz *et al.*, 2004). Hence the essence of Social CRM is to align business processes in such a way as it promotes the development of a quality relationship with the customers characterised by open dialogue and interactions; providing a situation where the organisation can learn about the needs and requirements of both existing and prospective customers and use the information in delivering customised, personalised and innovative products (Payne & Frow, 2006; Payne *et al.* 2009; Peppers & Roger, 2011).

Developing and sustaining such long-term customer relationship provides a lot of benefits to the organisation such as fostering upselling, cross-selling, increased and repeat purchasing, customer retention, word-of-mouth advertisements, reduced costs, etc. (Payne & Frow, 2006; Lusch *et al.* 2010; Nguyen & Mutum, 2012); which can be an effective marketing strategy for enhancing organisational performance, productivity and profitability (Boulding *et al.* 2005; Kransnikov *et al.* 2009). Social CRM achieves this by providing a framework for



coordinating the process between marketing, customer services and quality programs geared towards improving organisational performance (Boulding *et al.* 2005). Particularly, the advancement of Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, Google+ and a host of peer-to-peer websites like the wikis, blogs, microblogs, podcasts, etc. has brought a new dimension to customer relationship management (Kim & Ko, 2012; Giannakis-Bompolis & Boutsouki, 2014).

Rodriguez *et al.* (2012) describe Social CRM as a tool for modern businesses which allows the sharing of contents and creating of conversations geared towards greater customer engagement, which in turn is expected to create deeper and meaningful relationships with customers (existing as well as prospective customers) and other business partners. Particularly for customer service providers such as the telecom firms, Social CRM provides a suitable platform for enhancing customer service and satisfaction; which is a major source of competitive advantage (Pires *et al.* 2006; Smith, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Rai, 2013; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). To this end, one major focus of Social CRM is to foster stronger relationships between the organisations and the customers (including prospective ones) and leveraging on such interactions and relationships in making strategic investment decisions on the delivered products and/or services. In addition, Social CRM also has the function of helping service firms particularly telecom firms in market segmentation – allowing the

firms to identify and engage with the customer segments that provide the most value to the organisation (Pires *et al.* 2006; Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009; Zeng *et al.* 2010). Also with Social CRM, firms can identify sales trend which is needed for improving decision making and planning in the product design process, increase upselling by capturing, tracking and proffering solutions to issues within a unified system, increase the accuracy in tracking orders and customer queries, and provides the firms with a thorough understanding of the market by gathering customer insights as well as those of the competitors (Neff, 2010; Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

METHODS

Sample

Using purposive sampling techniques, nine industry experts of the Nigerian telecom industry were recruited – with the sample comprising of three interviewees each from the three leading telecom firms in Nigeria. The interviewees were recruited from the relevant departments within the organisations that were responsible for dealing directly or indirectly customer services and harnessing of the company's big data. This was to ensure that the appropriate insight into the implementation of Social CRM at the organisational level is uncovered; as the interviewees recruited were seasoned professionals and managers of their respective departments/portfolio. The participants were recruited on voluntary basis with the promise that their



identity and information provided would be treated with confidence.

Interviews

The interviewee was guided by a semi-structured interviewee, which gave the respondents a high degree of control over the conversation. The face-to-face interviews lasted between 35mins to 80mins on the average and each interview centered on the similar broad topics (see Table 1). When new topics were raised by the respondents, it was ensured that such topic was duly dealt with. All interviews were conducted at companies' office. The interview guide was emailed to the interviewees prior to the meeting and this was to ensure that they well informed on the issues being discussed and give them the opportunity to adequately ponder on the topic. Each interview session continued until data saturation was attained. The interviewing process lasted for two weeks. With the consent of the interviewees, each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exclusion of all personal related information.

Table 1: Interview Guide

- What is the Customer-centric approach to business in your company?
- How is your company approach customer relationship management?
- What is your company Social CRM Strategy?
- How is you company performing with the use of Social CRM in terms of gaining customer insights, engaging customers on social media, improving customer satisfaction and other organisational outcomes?

Analysis

Each recorded interview was analysed separately and immediately after the day's session transcribed verbatim in MS Word. A thematic analysis strategy was then used in identifying the patterns or themes within the data (Malhotra et al. 2012). Thematic analysis proceeded inductively; with the data set read thoroughly and codes assigned to text segments that bore information that were of interest as it regarded the research aim. Through a qualitative constant comparison process, pieces of data (i.e. interviews, statements, or a theme) were continuously compared in order to identify similarities and differences. Relevant codes were grouped into subthemes and were then summarised to form main themes. A second researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and checked the relevance of each theme. Differences in research perspective were discussed and agreement was reached. A qualitative data analysis software package (QSR NVivo 9) was used to organize the data efficiently and systematically.

RESULTS

The interviews involved nine-industry experts with an average of 9years industry experience in the Nigerian telecommunication sector. The interviewees were managers in the departments such as the customer relations, I.T, marketing departments of three of the major multinational telecommunication firms in Nigeria.



Major Themes:

Nigerian Tele-firms' Customer-centric Approach to Business

All nine participants asserted that the telecom firms' places customer-oriented service as the focus of their business strategy as it enabled them in connecting with the customers and making them understand the different products and services being offered: ... *"for us (Company A), customer service provides a platform to helping our customers understand our different products and services and so helping them in making the right decision on the product or service"* (Interviewee 1). Customer-oriented service was also considered to go beyond just delivering quality telecom products and service and to include fostering sound customer experience – right from the awareness stage, through to the purchasing processing and the post-purchase process:

"I am proud to say GLOBACOM is a customer-centric organisation. We put our customers at the center of our world, and this is as a result of our understanding that the satisfaction of our customers is pivotal to our survival in the industry. Hence, we (the company) optimize every opportunity to celebrate our customers. This attitude has continued to pull customers in multitude to the company and keeps pushing the company to the top of the industry. In spite of this success, the organisation continues to devise

several new ways to putting smiles on the faces of many of its customers and attracting prospective customers (Company B, Interviewee 5)".

In addition, adopting a customer-centric approach to be business was considered a means of gaining business advantage over the competitors within the industry: *customer-centric approach to business puts our company before others as we have been able to put our customers at the center of our business strategy and the result is clear, we understand the market better than any other of our competitors and we have been able to continue to improve our services better to the satisfaction of our customers (Company B, interviewee 6).*

Approach to Establishing Customer Relationship through Social Media

The interviewees were in general agreement also that social media has heavily influenced current marketing strategies; with the focus now being on the use of social media in identifying and establishing relationship with the customers. For instance, Interviewee 8 (Company C) responded that, ...*"the company has been able to shift its strategy from mass marketing to a segmented and targeted customer-marketing aided with social media channels"*.

Social media was also considered as a tool for creating brand strength through the interactions and building of relationship with the customers ... *"in our company we recognise the power of online communities*



and their influence on consumers' personal choices, and behaviour, ...and with the array of our social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram we have been able to create a channel for propagating our products and services to a large consumer audience" (Company A, Interviewee 3).

Further, social media is being leveraged as a medium for facilitating the building of relationships with the customers: ... *"every employee in this organisation is a potential contact-point to the customers on social media and have been trained to go the extra mile in meeting the expectations of the customer and using the customer social media platform to engage and developing a long-term relationship with the customers. And this has been the secret of our success; the ability to develop relationship with the customers and use consumer-generated information in designing innovative products and services" (Company A, Interviewee 1).*

This opinion is similarly shared by another interviewee from Company B ... *"social media has allowed the organisation to interact more freely and frequently with the customers and with the customer insights used in creating new products and services that meets customers' value and supersede their expectations" (Interviewee 6).*

Social CRM Capabilities

Each of the interviewees agreed that the most important modern challenge facing the industry is the capacity to generate and leverage on the deep customer insights provided by social media and then being able to deploy such information in offering quality and differentiated service and customer experience. The analysis of the interview data suggest that the Nigerian telecom firms are already leveraging on the vast technological software available in driving their social CRM strategy. For example, solutions such as eGain and IMImobile are being deployed by Company A as part of their Social CRM solution:

"The company uses the eGain Service – the industry's most comprehensive customer interaction hub software suite and its service include: integrated, award-winning applications for call tracking and resolution, contact centre knowledge management, multi-modal web self-service, email management, chat, web collaboration, fax/postal mail management, notifications and service fulfilment. This enabled us to ensure that the complaints and feedback of all customers were given quality responses; further improving the customer experience. In addition, the company also uses a customer service-drive software called IMImobile; a cloud-based communication driven software that is aimed at utilization digital channel optimization solutions for enhancing



the customer experience management strategy” (Interviewee 3).

Other interviewees from the other companies reported the use of other Social CRM solutions such as salesforce and nimble. Irrespective of the solution being deployed, they were agreement that such social CRM solution provided the company with the opportunity in developing long-term relationship with the customers, gather customer insight and in harnessing such customer data in understanding the customer data and ensuring that their services are been delivered to the right segment with their different attributes such as value, purchase behaviour and tenure of purchase:

... “with our Integrated Marketing Cloud, the company has been able to shift its strategy from mass marketing to a segmented and targeted customer-centric approach, improving response rates and customer satisfaction levels. And with data analytics, the company is also able to respond to inbound requests with the right offer at the right time. Campaigns that previously took six monthsto bring to market now take less than 4weeks, enabling us to achieve much more(Interviewee 9, Company C).

Perceived Benefits of Social CRM to Firms

By integrating Social CRM in their business strategies, the interviewees agreed that telecom firms in Nigeria are endearing

themselves to customer base and increasing brand awareness by delivering their services to online communities: *“With social media and social CRM system business can build brand awareness and brand loyalty. Social media platforms can help increase trust in your brand, ensure the delivery of quality customer service, obtain customer insight in real-time and get to know your customers better; provides an easy access to promoting product and services content and the most important of all, engaging with the customers” (Interviewee 1, Company A).*

Social CRM was not only seen as a medium for increasing customer interaction and building relationship but also as a means of improving internal communication with the organisation: *“Social CRM has allowed the organization to interact more freely with the customers and improved internal communication with the organisation. It has allowed the organisation and particularly the social CRM team in carrying out large-scale prospecting and engagement with the customers and helped in developing workable insights that has helped in mitigating risks and operational costs; while improving all aspects of the customer relationship” (Interviewee 4, Company B).*

The perceived benefits of Social CRM also included the ease of adapting to market dynamism and in responding to actions of competitors even if it has to do with evolving the organisational culture: *... “social CRM solutions in this company is used in fostering market research, product preferences research, and in detecting the industry trends” (interviewee 7 from Company C)” and*



... Social CRM enable the searching for information regarding industry trend and tracking market activities of the competing brands; with such information used in adapting the firm's business strategy and in the development of innovative products and services" (Interviewee 8, Company C).

DISCUSSION

In modern business environments, customers are now to be considered as the focal element of all marketing actions, with building and management of customer relationships using Social media becoming a high priority for many companies (Askool& Nakata, 2011; Alamgir &Shamsuddoha, 2015). The claim from these studies is that developing a customer orientation strategy has become vital for companies to survive and be successful in the currently saturated markets. Consistent with the strategic marketing literature, customer orientation depicts the belief that understanding and satisfying customers' needs should be the priority of any business organisation (Deshpande *et al.* 2000; Webb *et al.* 2000; Luo &Seyedian, 2004). Hence, focusing on the dynamic interactions between the organisation and its customers, the customer orientation concepts holds that all members of the organisation must continuously create superior value for the customers and must do so better than the competitors.

All four telecom firms shared positive evaluation of their customer orientation strategy. Customer-oriented approach is very important for service organisations especially those in a saturated market like the Nigerian telecom industry. From the interviewee with three major companies in

the industry, it can be deduced that telecom service operators are generally adopting the customer-centric approach to marketing of their products and services; otherwise referred to the market-pull model of marketing. This involves the identifying the customer's needs and then creating products that addresses and meets the needs. In this digital era, technical analysis of customer journeys has become an important feature for marketing and this allows companies to map out customer behaviour from the time when they seek information about products and services, make comparison with those of competitors and ultimately when they take the decision to purchase a product and buy it. According to Davenport (2006) companies that can systematically analyse this transactional data, are bound to outperform their competitors. This is in consonant with the findings in this current study; with the interviewees generally agreeing that collecting customer data provides positive outcomes for their respective telecom firms in terms of improved product/service innovation, increases in sales volume, induce innovation and in establishing better customer engagement through the creation of stronger brand loyalty.

The organizations' usage of Social media was also explored during the interview process. All four organisations reported deploying various Social media channels in interacting and engaging with their customers. Aside from the popular Social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram), other innovative platforms are being used by the organisations interacting and engaging with the customers. For instance, MTN reported



a dedicated WhatsApp channel in connecting with their customers. In addition, the company have a platform called the Voice of the Customer Initiative – which is used in gathering feedback from their customers with the aim of enhancing the quality of services delivered. In GLOBACOM, an internet-based channel (“live chat service”) in their website is used also in communicating with their customers in real-time. other digital customer touchpoints included Blackberry, Eskimi, Instagram and Google+. These findings are in line with the theoretical background that organisations are more readily adopting Social media channels to get closer to the customers. The interviewees signify that building relationships with the customers is the functional reasons while companies are adopting Social media as speculated by Trainor et al. (2014).

The motivation behind Facebook’s popularity is explained by its ability to create closer relationships with customers on a personal basis through personal and professional lives and strengthens networks. This reinforces the argument by Jussilaet al. (2014) that there are three major reasons why organisations are adopting Social media, and these are for communication, marketing, and network management. In addition, Katona & Savary (2014) state that Social media channels such as Facebook enables brand emotionalization and humanization which all three companies revealed to be central to their Social CRM strategy. Hence it can be suggested that their choice of Social media channels reflects the direction in which their marketing strategy is taking. Further exploration was conducted to

investigate the traffic in the Social media channels of the three organisations (see Appendix for the screen shots the Social media channels of the companies).

The findings from the analysis of the qualitative data indicate that telecom firms in Nigeria to a very large extent are incorporating social media in the CRM strategy. Along with scholarly efforts to categorize organizations’ usage of social media applications, marketing analysts are investigating the nature of social media applications adopted by organisations in shaping and maintaining good relationships with their customers (Go & You, 2016). Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google plus, WhatsApp, and blogs were identified as the commonly adopted social media channels by the three telecom firms investigated in this study. These social networking sites are used by the organisations to facilitate collaborative social experiences and dialogue with the customers, therefore allowing social customer relationship management or social CRM to take place (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). These social networking sites have also been regarded as effective channels for organisations seeking to implement diverse branding strategies, given that these sites allow customers to share their experiences and opinion concerning the organisation’s products and brand in real time (Jansen et al. 2009; Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

The finding from the interview with the three organisations suggest that they are adopting Social CRM in order to gain competitive advantage, mutually beneficial relationships with the customers and the possibility of co-creating value (Sennet al.



2013; Harrigan & Miles, 2014). The interviews revealed that all three organisations placed high priority in gaining new customers, retaining old customers and enhancing their loyalty through sustained communication efforts supported by Social media and satisfying the individual customer's needs. The respondents were all in agreement that customer relationships

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study shows that telecom firms are leverage on the advantages of Social CRM solutions in advancing their customer-centric approach to business. Social CRM is being adopted as a tool for gaining competitive advantage by establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with their customers by providing co-creation value. This finding is consistent with the evidence in the literature that modern businesses are increasingly adopting Social CRM solutions. However, despite the growing interest and popularity in social CRM, there is a dearth in the literature on how it is being implemented especially for developing countries where technological capabilities are not well advanced compared to the developed markets. Also, there is limited research evidence on the success of such solutions especially in the telecom industry. This study is therefore a first in the series of papers to come that is focused on bridging this research gap.

are valuable assets to their firms which is clearly emphasised by the top management. By perceiving their customers as valuable assets, it implies that the companies consider their customers are important value co-creators and recognises that without this collaboration neither party achieves the mutual benefits (Senn et al. 2013).

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