

Sales Force Competence Management and Customer Satisfaction of Telecommunication Firms in Port Harcourt

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between sales force competence management and customer satisfaction of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt. This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. Information obtained from the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC, 2022) reveals that there are four telecommunications' service providers in Nigeria, and all four of them are operational in Port Harcourt. Since the population of the study consists of just four telecommunications firm, the study adopted the census sampling method in which all elements of the population constitute the sample size. We randomly administered a maximum of fifty copies of the questionnaire each to the telecoms' outlets and service centres of the four registered and operational telecoms firms situated in Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt City Local Government Areas making a sample size of Two Hundred staff of the registered telecoms firms. Out of which one hundred and ninety-three were retrieved and used for the analysis. The Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was adopted as the test statistics for the hypotheses. The study found a significant relationship between the dimensions of sales force competence management and the measures of customer satisfaction. The study therefore concludes that a significant relationship exists between sales force competence management and customer satisfaction. The study recommends that efforts should be made by the management of the telecoms firms to ensure that issues such as service timelines, quality (both in content of service and quality of attendance to customers) and excellence are maintained and form a core of the business ideals and reputation. Also, in order to increase the likelihood of customers buying from them again, businesses can provide additional services that enhance the customer's experience and listen to and respond to consumer comments,

recommendations, criticism, and complaints about the product or services being offered and provide timely response.

Keywords: Sales Force Competence Management, Customer Satisfaction, Sales Force Competence Planning, Sales Force Competence Development, Actual Patronage, Repeat Patronage.

Introduction

Increasing sales effectiveness is a top concern for chief sales officers, especially as organizations prepare for growth in the post-recession world. However, recent research shows that many companies struggle to achieve this goal. Significant gaps exist between sales leaders' goals and their actual achievements to date. The concept of core competence advanced by Prahalad and Hamel (2010) has prompted many organizations throughout the world to identify, and develop their own core competences (Scarbrough, 2018). Core competences are defined as the collective knowledge and capabilities that are embedded in the organization; they are central determinants of the organization's competitiveness due to their centrality to customers' value, their resistance to imitation, and their ability to extend to new business applications (Hamel & Prahalad, 2014).

The core competence perspective of strategic management reflects the resource-based view of the organization (Vonkrogh & Roos, 2015), which argues that an organization's competitive advantage derives from the valuable, rare, and inimitable resources that it can marshal. With its focus on organizational knowledge as a key strategic resource, the resource-based view in general and the core competence perspective in particular, is well-suited to strategy formulation and management in knowledge-intensive organization (Conner & Prahalad, 2016). It is a widely held premise that people provide organizations with an important source of sustainable competitive advantage (Prahalad, 2013; Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 2014) and that the effective management of human capital, not physical capital, may be the ultimate determinant of organizational performance (Adler, 2018; Reich, 2011). The value of human capital may be especially apparent in modern manufacturing industries that have invested heavily on production innovations such as advanced manufacturing technology, statistical process control and computer numerically controlled machine, tools and equipment. Such initiatives tend to depend heavily on employee skills, abilities and commitment as key components in the customer value creation process (Snell & Dean, 2012). Accordingly, it is imperative for firms to harness the productive potential of their sales force in order to achieve sales superior performance (Stanton & Futrell, 2007). Highly competitive firms are worried on how to harness sales force potential knowing that effective sales are gotten from, and on direct personal selling. Considering the indispensable role of sales force, the relationship between sales force competence management and customer satisfaction still require more accelerated research as much of the research seems more of speculative and theoretical. It follows that the core problem of this research stems from the fact that there are too many firms with different products (policies) which require highly knowledgeable and skilled sales men to sell.

In line with the level of sales force awareness in Nigeria, many customers have been lost to alternative competitors and so selling policies have become very difficult with a more 90% chance of rejection of policies, hence firms have also a challenge in employing the best methods and strategies to manage their sales force in order to increase their market/sales performance. Again, most firms are

yet to uncover that all methods of sales force management, trainings, coaching, and role playing are not equally effective on customer satisfaction and that far less of the research has consider the various effect of sales force management on customer satisfaction.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between sales force competence management and customer satisfaction of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt. In line with this purpose, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between sales force competence planning and customer satisfaction of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt?
2. Is there any significant relationship between sales force competence development and customer satisfaction of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt?

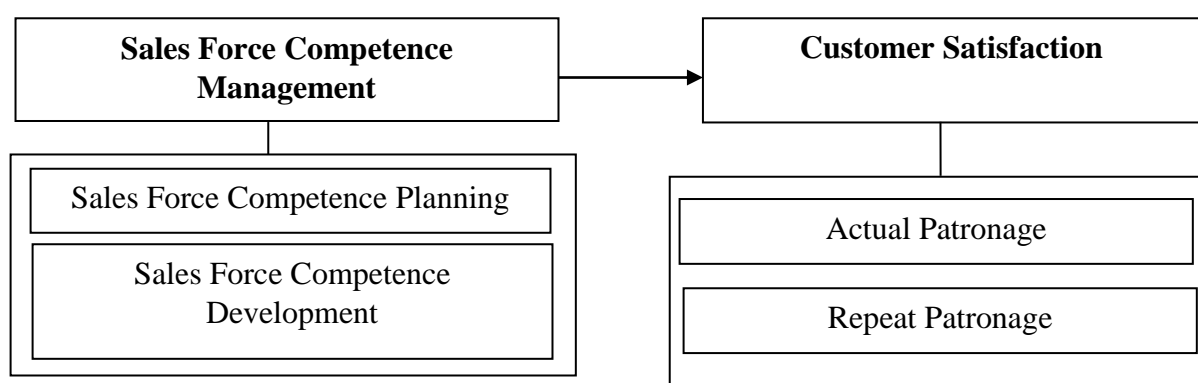


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Sales Force Competence Management and Customer Satisfaction of Telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt.

Source: Desk Research, 2023

Literature

Concept of Sales Force Competence Management

Sales force competence is defined as those observable knowledge, skills, and behaviour, which differentiate between superior and other performers in the context of sales job (Asiegbu, 2019). Sales job competence is a demonstration to building and sustaining superior marketing exchange relationships with customers and the total commitment and willingness to exhibit appropriate behaviour in a specific selling context.

A firm's sales force is a team consisting of a stock of salespeople acting for the firm in prospecting, communicating, servicing, and information gathering (Asiegbu, 2019). The term competence originated from latin verb "competere", which means to be suitable. Competence is groupings of behaviors that encompass the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motives, and temperament that distinguish excellent performers (Schoonover, Schoonover, Nemerov, & Ehly, 2010). Competence is the ability and willingness to carry out a task by applying knowledge and skills (Johansson & Hurria, 2022). Competence is a collection of observable behaviors that superior performers exhibit more consistently than average performers, grouped according to a central theme;

the combined knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform a specific job or task (Morgan & Rego, 2016). Key characteristics of competence are that it should be observable and measurable (Ambler, 2013). Competence is a functional adequacy and the capacity to integrate knowledge and skills with attitude and values into the specific contexts of practice (Defloor, *et al.*, 2016). Competences are dynamically combined by the performer to meet situational requirements (Ley, Albert, & Lindstaedt, 2017). Klein (2016) argues that competences are not psychological constructs but thematic groups of demonstrated observable behaviours that discriminate between superior and average performance.

Sales force competence is important in several ways. First, there is an increasing quest among firms to garner rent-yielding intangible or tacit assets on the basis of distinctive competence to achieve above-normal customer satisfaction (Prahalad & Hamel, 2010). Second, for an organization to achieve consistently above-normal customer satisfaction, it must create a Sustainable Competitive Advantage. Competitive advantage stems from proprietary assets that are not easily purchased, stolen, imitated or substituted for. Human capital is the most potent of these assets, and competency-based human resources management involves operational structures and processes, which are based on the concept and results of the management of core competences and tacit individual competences of employees (Ahiauzu, 2016; Armstrong, 2011) such as sales force. Third, many people have misconceptions about the selling process, sales force activities and the personal characteristics necessary for a successful sales career. Various selling jobs can involve very different tasks and require different knowledge, skills and abilities (Johnston & Marshall, 2013). Fourth, market orientation consists of three behavioral components - customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination, and two decision criteria - long -term focus and profitability. These, in no small measure, require competent and well-managed sales force to carry out these functions and achieve these objectives, thus, the growing need for a good framework for managing sales force competence for better performance in sales job. Fifth, today, the most prevalent formalization of a customer-centric culture is Customer-Relationship Management (CRM). Central to achieving CRM objectives is the pivotal role of the sales force, as the boundary spanner between the firm and its customers.

Sales force competence management is the process of planning and developing the knowledge, skills, and behavior of an organization's sales force members for superior performance in sales job. Sales force competence planning and sales force competence development are used as dimensions of sales force competence management.

Sales Force Competence Planning

Personal development plans and competence sourcing are two actions that are included in competence planning, which outlines how the company intends to close the identified competence gaps. Asiegbu (2019) observes that personal development plan involves ascertaining individual sales person's expressed and selected action plan as well as various development sources/alternatives including tools and resource person available for the individual development plan to be actualized. Generally, development plans do the following. (i) They describe individual sales person action plan which is an expression and a selection of knowledge, skill and level and behavior ambitions and/or new interest domain. (ii) They link competences to training resources. (iii) They create project teams

based on skill requirements. (iv) They determine training progress tracking technique. (v) They make automatic recommendations based on the result of competence gap analysis. Since personal development plan allows the individual salesperson to set his or her own targets and select means of achieving them, he or she would be committed to the development program and thus close the earlier identified competence gaps by becoming competent at the end of the development program.

Competence sourcing involves identifying learning resources that can be utilized during development to minimize the individual competence gaps (Adler, 2018). Firms can lease personnel or in-source a consultant to be engaged in the competence development (Johansson & Hurria, 2013). Sourcing training contents, procedures and other resources are usually planned at this stage in order to choose or guide the development of instructional aids and strategies (Halim & Ali, 2010). Thus, it is apparent that sales force competence planning provides a ground work for sales force competence development.

Sales Force Competence Development

Sales force competence development is the activity of broadening the competence dimensions and levels of individual salespeople, which will help achieve the sales and marketing objectives and meet its needs (Johansson & Hurria, 2013). It involves building the knowledge and skills of sales person with the aim of preparing them take on new responsibilities and challenges. This entails making sale people acquire new horizons, technologies, or viewpoints with the goal of being able to do more with less and increase creative problem-solving abilities. Sales force competence development can be achieved through training, coaching and mentoring (Development Zone Document, 2018).

Training is a process of acquiring specific skills and knowledge to perform a job better. Training focuses on using appropriate techniques to transfer knowledge and skills, which are intended to change a sales person's current behavior to desired sales job behavior. Coaching is the transfer of wisdom from a wise and trusted teacher. It is about increasing an individual's knowledge and thought processes with a particular tasks or process. Coaching creates a supportive environment that develops critical thinking skills, ideas, and behaviors about a subject. Coaching is performed on the job. The coach uses real tasks and problems to help the learner increase his or her performance. Mentoring is the transfer of wisdom from a wise and trusted teacher. Thus, it relies on the mentor's specific knowledge and wisdom. According to Fine and Pullin, (1998) mentoring is the support and guidance that an experienced person (mentor) provides to a less experienced person project. Mentoring sales people has the tendency to make them minimize or close their competence gaps and become more effective and competent in their sales job.

Concept of Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been extensively studied by marketing scholars (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2012; Heskett, Lones, Loveman, & Sasser, 2014). Kotler and Keller (2012) defined satisfaction as a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's perceived performance in relation to his or her expectations. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the products of service itself, provided or is providing a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under or over-fulfilment (Hamilton-Ibama & Ogonu, 2021).

Satisfied customers will repeat the purchase, be brand loyal, convey positive word-of-mouth advertising, and all these will enhance patronage. Dissatisfied customers may stop buying the product, spread unfavorable word-of-mouth advertising, and may avoid the product. Simeon and Hamilton-Ibama (2022) stated that customer satisfaction provides many advantages for companies. Higher levels of customer satisfaction lead to more loyalty.

Others define customer satisfaction as the feeling or attitude of customers toward a product/service after it has been used. Customer Satisfaction can be described as that feeling of having accomplished one's individual inner desires, the feelings of elation or deflation that come from a comparison of the products' perceived performance and expectations (Hamilton-Ibama, 2019). Customer satisfaction is the primary mental state of customer which comprises two things: (1) Expectation before purchase, and (2) Perception about performance after purchase (Satendra & Singh, 2011). Customer satisfaction can be defined using the transaction-specific perspective or cumulative perspective. The transaction perspective indicates that customer satisfaction is the evaluation based on the recent purchase experiences. Compared with the transaction-specific perspective, the cumulative perspective stresses overall evaluation, indicating that evaluation of customer satisfaction should be based on all the purchase experiences of the customer disregarding any specific purchase experience (Grewal & Levy, 2010). The cumulative perspective is more capable of evaluating the service performance of firms more effectively in predicting consumers' post-purchase behaviors (Wang & Hui, 2017). Among the studies of customer satisfaction in the telecommunication and information technology industry revealed that customer satisfaction of mobile commerce is consumer's total response to the purchase experiences in a mobile commerce environment (Yim, Anderson, & Swaminathan, 2014). Firms will not be able to retain their customers without satisfying them (Woodruff, 2017; Yim, Anderson, & Swaminathan, 2014).

It is apparent that greater service only is not satisfactory in appeasing customers. Satisfaction is vital. Several service providers assert that generating and sustaining customer satisfaction is significant and they are cognizant of the constructive tenets that relationships offer. This study adopted actual patronage and repeat patronage as measures of customer satisfaction.

Actual Patronage

For products to be developed, designed, and communicated in a way that is appropriate for consumers and reflects their relevant and significant needs, it is crucial to appreciate the role that psychological principles designed to harness an understanding of consumers' needs play in influencing a customer's decision to patronize. When deciding what to buy or which business to support, consumers go through a five-step decision-making process: identifying a need, gathering relevant data, weighing their options, making a final selection, and implementing post-patronage strategies (Grewal & Levy, 2010). Choosing a path to choose when faced with multiple possibilities is what we mean when we talk about making a decision. Customers make choices often and on a daily basis. Our mental and emotional equilibrium determines every action we do, including whether or not to patronize.

Repeat Patronage

Repeat patronage has been perceived and established by most marketing researchers as an indicator of customer's positive behaviour to business organization (Jacoby & Kyner, 2016). Repeat

patronage is buyers' decision to continuously patronize or buy from a firm's product over a period of time despite the presence of other competitive goods and services. Hamilton-Ibama and Ogonu (2022) defined repeat purchase/patronage as the patronage of a service provider by a consumer of the same brand name previously bought on another occasion. Repeat Patronage is the percentage or number of customers or buyers that patronizes or purchases particular commodity/goods for a second time. It refers to how often a customer buys goods again (Hamilton-Ibama & Jaja, 2021). A consumer who agrees to re-patronize the same brand or goods and services is usually based on the fact he or she had a good experience or the expectations level were reached. Retaining and ensuring that consumers are loyal with ability to repeat patronage is significant to businesses holding that the cost of gaining new buyers is five times higher than the cost of sustaining repeat patronage (Kuo, Hu, & Yang, 2013).

Repeated patronages are referred to as "re-patronage action" in some settings. Re-patronization is described as an individual's propensity to return as a customer of a service organisation (Wirtz & Lwin, 2009). Ogonu and Hamilton-Ibama (2023) defined repeat purchase as the degree to which customers are willing to purchase the same product repeatedly. Repeat patronage from customers is often taken as an indication of their loyalty to a certain brand. Repeat customers who spend more money on average are clearly happy with the service they've received. According to Hamilton-Ibama and Ogonu (2022) repeat purchase is often a measure of retention of a brand by consumers and is often taken into account by marketing research professionals to evaluate a business. Greater profitability may be realised through increased repeat patronage value, as this does not factor in the expense of gaining new clients.

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. Information obtained from the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC, 2022) reveals that there are four telecommunications' service providers in Nigeria, and all four of them are operational in Port Harcourt. Since the population of the study consists of just four telecommunications firm, the study adopted the census sampling method in which all elements of the population constitute the sample size. We randomly administered a maximum of fifty copies of the questionnaire each to the telecommunication firms of the four registered and operational telecoms firms situated in Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt City Local Government Areas making a sample size of Two Hundred staff of the registered telecommunication firms. Out of which one hundred and ninety-three were retrieved and used for the analysis. The Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was adopted as the test statistics for the hypotheses with the aid of SPSS version 22.

Results

Relationship between Sales Force Competence Planning and Actual Patronage

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between sales force competence planning and actual patronage of the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt.

Table 1: Test for Correlation between Sales Force Competence Planning and Actual Patronage

			Sales Force Competence Planning	Actual Patronage
		Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.520**
	Sales Force Competence Planning	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	193	193
Spearman's rho		Correlation Coefficient	.520**	1.000
	Actual Patronage	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	193	193

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 revealed that there is a moderate relationship between sales force competence planning and actual patronage. The data indicates that sales force competence planning is significantly associated with actual patronage (where $\rho=.520$ and $P<0.05$). The finding suggests that sales force competence planning is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction which is measured in terms of actual patronage.

Relationship between Sales Force Competence Planning and Repeat Patronage

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between sales force competence planning and repeat patronage of the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt.

Table 2: Test for Correlation between Sales Force Competence Planning and and Repeat Patronage

			Sales Force Competence Planning	Repeat Patronage
		Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.860**
	Sales Force Competence Planning	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	193	193
Spearman's rho		Correlation Coefficient	.860**	1.000
	Repeat Patronage	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	193	193

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 revealed that there is a high relationship between sales force competence planning and repeat patronage. The data indicates that sales force competence planning is significantly associated with repeat patronage (where $\rho=.860$ and $P<0.05$). The finding suggests that sales force

competence planning is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction which is measured in terms of repeat patronage.

Relationship between Sales Force Competence Development and Actual Patronage

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between sales force competence development and actual patronage of the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt.

Table 3: Test for Correlation between Sales Force Competence Development and Actual Patronage

			Sales Force Competence Development	Actual Patronage
Spearman's rho	Sales Force Competence Development	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.971**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	193	193
	Actual Patronage	Correlation Coefficient	.971**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	193	193

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 revealed that there is a very high relationship between sales force competence development and actual patronage. The data indicates that sales force competence development is significantly associated with actual patronage (where $\rho = .971$ and $P < 0.05$). The finding suggests that sales force competence development are significant predictors of customer satisfaction which is measured in terms of actual patronage.

Relationship between Sales Force Competence Development and Repeat Patronage

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between sales force competence development and repeat patronage of the telecommunication industry in Port Harcourt.

Table 4: Test for Correlation between Sales Force Competence Development and Repeat Patronage

			Sales Force Competence Development	Repeat Patronage
Spearman's rho	Sales Force Competence Development	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.724**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	193	193
		Correlation Coefficient	.724**	1.000

Repeat	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Patronage	N	193

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 revealed that there is a high relationship between sales force competence development and repeat patronage. The data indicates that sales force competence development is significantly associated with repeat patronage (where $\rho = .724$ and $P < 0.05$). The finding suggests that sales force competence development are significant predictors of customer satisfaction which is measured in terms of repeat patronage.

Discussions of Findings

The world is becoming increasingly, a global village, stiffening competition by the day. Consequently, selling job is becoming so difficult that only professionals achieve significant success in it. Sales force competence management is a critical function and a managerial function that determines the loyalty and patronage of consumers in every organization.

Sales Force Competence Planning and Customer Satisfaction

The results of hypotheses one and two revealed that there is a significant relationship between sales force competence planning and customer satisfaction. The findings of Webster (2012), Gillis and Beauchemin (2012), Baker (1999), and Quartey (2012) corroborate this present study finding that there is relationship between sales force competence planning and customer satisfaction. These findings are in agreement with Webster (2012) who is of the opinion that sales force must demonstrate expertise level competence in customer value delivery. In addition, customer focused-selling, team work interpersonal skills, marketing communications, and computer literacy have been listed as competences that are fundamental to the effective performance of the sales force. The finding also agrees with the position of Gillis and Beauchemin (2012) who posits that an expert sales force should consistently demonstrate competence in product knowledge, business planning, customer awareness, and knowledge sharing.

In addition, customer focused-selling, team work interpersonal skills, marketing communications, and computer literacy have been listed as competences that are fundamental to the effective performance of the sales force (Baker, 1999). Scholars allude generally as supported by empirical evidences that sales force competence correlates to performance, both to employee and organization. It has been proven severally that there is a strong positive connection between sales force competence planning and employee/customer satisfaction through its efficiency in time management, optimum quality and quantity output, minimizing the risk, and profitability (Quartey, 2012).

Sales Force Competence Development and Customer Satisfaction

The results of hypotheses one and two revealed that there is a significant relationship between sales force competence development and customer satisfaction. This study findings affirms the findings of Johnston and Marshall (2013), Olusanya, Awotungase and Ohadebere, (2012), Shaheen, Naqvi and Khan (2013), Cathrine (2013), Black and Lynch (1995), Shahid, Shams, and Khursheed

(2013), and Ley, Albert, and Lindstaedt (2017) that a relationship exist between sales force competence development and customer satisfaction. Johnston and Marshall (2013) in their study on sales force management opined that seminar method of training can be very effective for new employees and less costly especially if the training is for a large audience. Though, few contrast studies have shown that training does have a weak and insignificant outcome on performance since it devoid to link to strategic plan. Similarly, Olusanya, Awotungase and Ohadebere, (2012) carried out a study on sales force management and development using sterling bank in Nigeria as s case study, and found that sales force management and development programs is highly important as it increases the organization's staff efficiency, skills and productivity via effective training methods like coaching, workshops and seminars.

Furthermore, Shaheen, Naqvi and Khan (2013) worked on employee training and organizational performance in Kotli district. They sampled 174 teachers and found a positive relation between training and performance. Cathrine (2013) studies affirmed that staff training and development that is coaching newly employed sales personnel as they carry out their present jobs positively improves the drive, initiative and quality of work of the employee. They said that training must be aligned with other organizational strategy, structure and culture in order to result in high meaningful performance. Further, finding was that only off- the-job training improves performance contrast to on the job-training (Black & Lynch, 1995). Shahid, Shams, and Khursheed, (2013) concluded that coaching of the sales force leads to increase in sales volume. The findings are also in agreement with the views of Ley, Albert, and Lindstaedt (2017) who proposed that in developing competence, a sales force must have the ability to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate communicative behaviour in a given situation. Developing competence describes the ability to choose a communication behaviour that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that sales force competence management have significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Sales force competence management is positively inclined to bring about customer's purchase action, which in turn will lead to a repeat purchase and positive organizational image on the verge of customer satisfaction. Given this assertion, the study recommends that efforts should be made by the management of the telecoms firms to ensure that issues such as service timelines, quality (both in content of service and quality of attendance to customers) and excellence are maintained and form a core of the business ideals and reputation. Also, in order to increase the likelihood of customers buying from them again, businesses can provide additional services that enhance the customer's experience and listen to and respond to consumer comments, recommendations, criticism, and complaints about the product or services being offered and provide timely response.

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