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Selective Distribution Strategies and Customer Satisfaction of Soft Drink Distributors in Rivers State

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***Abstract**: This study examined the relationship between selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction of soft drinks distributors in Rivers State. The objectives of the study were to determine the extent to which selective distribution strategy relate with customer satisfaction of soft drinks distributors in Rivers State. The study adopted cross-sectional research design. The population of the study was twenty (20) soft drink distributors in Rivers State as obtained from Nigeria Directory (2023). The researcher adopted a census study because of the small size of the study population hence, there was no need for sampling. However, 3 managers were drawn from each of the twenty (20) soft drink distributors that constituted the study population. In all, sixty (60) managers constituted the respondents for the study. Data were collected through semi- structured questionnaire that was designed in the Likert 5-poinit scale of very low extent to very high extent. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean, standard deviation frequency distribution, and bar chart. Inferential statistics of Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the six hypotheses. Similarly, multiple regression analysis was used in testing the combined effect of all dimensions on each measure of criterion variable and aided with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 23.0). From the data analysis, it was revealed that, a selective distribution strategy has positive and significantly relationship with customer satisfaction of soft drink distributors in Rivers State. Based on these findings, the study concluded that there is a significant and positive relationship between selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction. This result corroborated the findings of previous studies. Therefore, recommend that soft drinks distributors in Rivers State should stay tuned to selective distribution strategy in order to embrace cost efficient and high the levels of satisfaction.*

***Keywords:** Selective Distribution Strategies; Customer Satisfaction; Repeat Purchase; Customer Retention.*

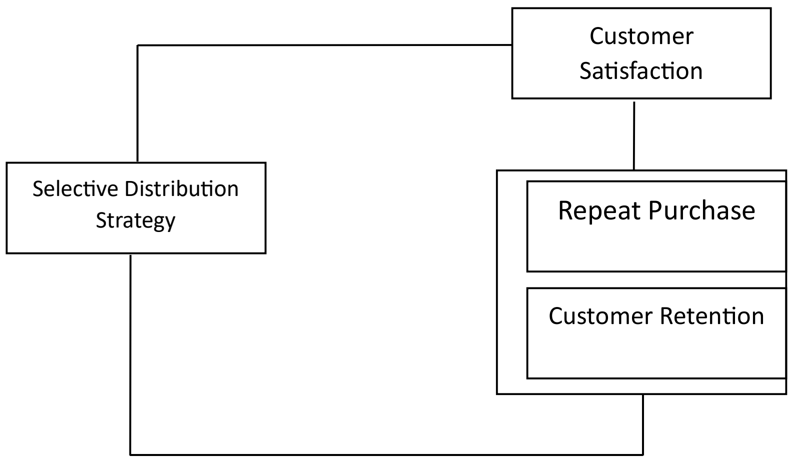
Introduction

Every company which intends to improve on its marketing has to create good marketing strategies for its efficient and effective operations. These strategies if effectively used should increase the sales and customer advocacy of such company/ and will also enable the company to achieve its stated goals/objectives (Nwaizugbo, 2014). As industries engage in production of goods and services, they need to make them available to consumers at the right time, right place and at the least cost (price). All these cannot be without effective and efficient system put in place. Strategy is an action plan or a set of plans intended to achieve specific goals or objectives over a period of time (Verma & Verma, 2018). Distribution is one of the four aspects of marketing. A distributor is the middleman between the manufacturer and retailer. After a product is manufactured, it may be warehoused or shipped to the next echelon in the supply chain, typically a distributor, retailer or consumer.

Frequently there may be a chain of intermediaries; each passing the product down the chain to the next organization, before it finally reaches the consumer or end-user. This process is known as the distribution strategy. Each of the elements in these chains will have their own specific needs, which the producer must take into account, along with those of the all-important end-user (Kotler 2003). Developing successful strategy in distribution in today's fierce competitive environment is a complex undertaking. Customer satisfaction is used as a measure of how products and services supplied by a company meet or surpass customer expectation and it is seen as a key performance indicator within businesses. Selective distribution plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction for soft drink distributors. By carefully choosing which retailers or outlets can sell their products, soft drink distributors can maintain a certain level of quality, consistency, and brand image, ultimately influencing customers' satisfaction (Alta, Imran & Shahzad, 2011).

When a distributor opts for selective distribution, they can ensure that their products are available only at specific locations that meet certain requirements. This strategy allows them to control factors such as product availability, display, and customer service, which are essential for ensuring a positive customer experience. D'Souza, et al (2016) found that selective distribution positively impacts customer satisfaction by enhancing product availability, ensuring better customer service, and maintaining consistent branding across outlets, customers tend to have a more favorable perception of brands that are strategically available in selected outlets, as it implies exclusively and quality. This approach can help enhance customer satisfaction by meeting consumer expectations, improving product accessibility, repeat purchase, consumer retention and brand loyalty. Though, it is essential for distributors to continuously monitor and evaluate customer feedback, market trends, and distribution performance to make necessary adjustments and optimize the effectiveness of their selective distribution strategy.

However, review of extant literature revealed that there is shortness of knowledge of how selective distribution can relate with customer satisfaction. The researchers believe that this study will result in increased attention on selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction allows other researchers to create a stream of empirical research in this important and timely area. Hence, this work aims to evaluate relationship between selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction of soft drink distributors Rivers State.



Conceptual framework on the relationship between selective distribution strategies and customer satisfaction of soft drink distributors in Rivers State

Source: Researcher Desk 2024.

Theoretical Foundation

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

The theory aims to explain voluntary behaviour by an individual and the underlying motivation that drives an action. The theory was developed to offer a better understanding of the relationship among attitudes, intention, which in turn is influenced by attitude towards the behaviour and the social normative perceptions regarding it (Fishbein, 1967). Operationalization of Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) constructs was developed from attitude measurement theory rooted in the concept that attitude is influenced by expectation or beliefs concerning attributes of the object or action and evaluation of those attributes (Ajzen&Albarracin, 2007; Trafimow, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the TRA was modified to reflect the measurements of attitudes that serve as antecedent factors that ultimately influence action. These are the explanatory variables, such as: good access road; constant electricity; constant water supply; basic security facilities and convenient parking space.

Concept of Selective Distribution Strategy

Selective distribution is a strategy in which few selected distribution outlets are given the opportunity or right to distribute a firm's products (Ilodigwe, 2011). It is the use of more than one but fewer than all the intermediaries who are willing to carry the company's products (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). According to Bhasin (2018) it is the method where every possible outlet is serviced and the company's product is made available in that outlet. Selective distribution involves using more than one, but lesser than all the intermediaries and distributors who carry the company's products on a basis of a company specific set of rules (Skool, 2020). Wagner-von (2019) defines selective distribution system (SDS) as consisting of vertical agreements between a supplier and one or more distributors that (1) specify selection criteria which have to be met by undertakings/firms before they can be admitted into the SDS as 'authorized distributors', and (2) prevent the re-sale of the product to non-authorized distributors. It is a distribution strategy in which products are distributed in more than one location (Jenkins, 2021).

According to Chand (2021) selective distribution is a strategy in which a producer uses a limited number of outlets in a geographical area to sell products. Similarly, Palo (2021) defines selective distribution as a strategy where a producer sells its products or services in a few exclusively chosen retail outlets in a specific geographical area. Tatum (2021) defines that selective distribution is a retail strategy that involves making a product or group of products available only in certain markets. Selective distribution lies between intensive and exclusive distribution (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013; Skool, 2021; Jenkins, 2021) the use of more than one but fewer than all the intermediaries who are willing to carry a company's products. Most television, furniture, and home appliance brands are distributed in this manner. Selective distribution gives producers good market coverage with more control and less cost than does intensive distribution. With this strategy, products are distributed in more than one location, but not as many as with an intensive distribution strategy. For example, clothing from different brands may be offered selectively. This can help craft an implicit higher-end brand message while also increasing the opportunity for shoppers to purchase one of its products (Jenkins, 2021). According to Chand (2021), the advantage of this approach is that the producer can choose the most appropriate or best-performing outlets and focus effort (e.g., training) on them.

According to Marvi (2021) selective distribution occurs when a company resorts to opening up a limited number of outlets in a specific geographical location. Selective distribution is the most effective distribution strategy for high-end brands that want to set up a limited number of outlets in a particular geographical location. This is quite different from exclusive distribution (which can be a little too extreme) and is considered as a middle path approach to distribution. This type of strategy works best when dealing with consumers that like to "shop around". Or simply put, it's ideal for customers who may have special brand preferences when they are purchasing a specific product. Sure, this may sound restrictive at best but it actually helps the producer filter out the best-performing outlets. This yields better results and allows the company to put in all their focus effort (training facilities and resource) to better use. It functions as a favourable alternative for manufacturing firms that would rather focus on a few outlets instead of dissipating their energies and resources on countless marginal ones (Marvi, 2021).

This alternative is the middle path approach to distribution. Here, the firm selects some outlets to distribute its products. This alternative helps focus the selling effort of manufacturing firms on a few outlets rather than dissipating it over countless marginal ones. It also enables the firm to establish a good working relationship with channel members. Selective distribution can help the manufacturer gain optimum market coverage and more control but at a lesser cost than intensive distribution. Both existing and new firms are known to use this alternative.

Concept of Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the primary mental state of customer which comprises two things: (1) Expectation before purchase, and (2) Perception about performance after purchase (Oliver 2000; & Satendra *et al,* 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 (Boulding, *et al* 2000). 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. Parasuraman, *et al,* (1988) argued that the cumulative perspective is more capable of evaluating the service performance of firms more effectively in predicting consumers' post-purchase behaviours (Wang *et al*, 2004).

On the other hand, customer satisfaction is a personal feeling of either pleasure or disappointment resulting from the evaluation of services provided by an organization to an individual in relation to expectations. Roberts (2009) defined customer satisfaction as "the degree to which a business's product or service performance matches up to the expectation of the customer. Customer satisfaction is influenced by expectations, perceived service and perceived quality. Service providers frequently place a higher priority on customer satisfaction because it has been seen as a prerequisite to customer retention. Among the studies of customer satisfaction in the telecommunication and information technology industry, Lin and Wu (2011) revealed that customer satisfaction of mobile commerce is consumer's total response to the purchase experiences in a mobile commerce environment. Therefore, in this study, customer satisfaction is defined as the total consumption perception of consumers when using mobile value-added services.

Customer satisfaction is an integral part of business objectives of any organization irrespective of the nature of the organization and however, more pronounced in business oriented organizations can be achieved through understanding the needs of the target market and the provision of needs satisfying packages in meeting and satisfying these needs at a greater extent, thus, building and maintaining long lasting and favourable relationship with the target market. (Ibojo, et al 2013). According to Rahim,*et al* (2012), consumer satisfaction is a critical focus for effective marketing programs. Oliver (1999) viewed the fact that consumer satisfaction remains a worthy pursuit among the consumer marketing community. Yi (1991) stated that consumer satisfaction is a collective outcome of perception, evaluation and psychological reactions to the consumption experience with a product or service. Consumer satisfaction is regarded as how consumers can get more benefits than their cost.

Oliver (2000) suggests that customer satisfaction is the core philosophy of marketing strategy of any organisation and plays a key role in an organisation success. He opines that customer satisfaction is vital for the brand loyalty as it is an important reason to attach someone with a particular brand. Customer satisfaction has traditionally been regarded as a fundamental determinant of long term customer behaviour. According to Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003) the more satisfied customers are, the greater is their retention, the positive word of mouth generated through them and the financial benefits to the firms who serve them. It is not surprising therefore that the fundamental aim of firms is to seek to manage and increase customer satisfaction at least in this era of competitive global marketing. Customer satisfaction is defined as an overall evaluation of a firm's products or service (Anderson, Fornell& Rust, 1997). In the marketing literature, satisfaction has been established as a major antecedent of customer retention. In the context of relationship marketing, satisfaction is conceptualized as an element of the relationship quality concept. In the same vein, Mohsam, et al. (2011) observed that the issue of customer satisfaction has been gaining increasing attention among researchers and practitioners as a fundamental tool in financial institutions for enhancing organizational performance and profitability. Mohsam et al. (2011) further observed that the issue of customer satisfaction cannot be easily dismissed because the happier the customers, the easier they disseminate information about the products.

Repeat Purchase

Repeat purchase can be described as the placing of order after order by a consumer from the same organization; it can also be seen as the buying of a product or services by a consumer of the same brand. Repeat purchase customers are customers who are satisfied emotionally, intellectually, physically with an organization offering which could be in the form of a product which exceeds their expectations. Repeat purchase is the prime goal a firm can set for its products since it is a consumer reference to purchase a given brand in a product category. Customer repeat purchase is a good indicator of a long term business sustainability and profitability of an organization; this is because it points to customer satisfaction and retention (Nwulu & Asiegbu, 2015).

A repeat purchase is often a measure of loyalty to a brand by consumers, higher repeat purchase value means a well retained, satisfied customer, also higher repeat purchase value drives higher customer value, which means a better top line in the loyalty ladder. Higher repeat purchase value can mean higher profitability as it does not include new customer acquisition costs; an organization can take some actions to ensure repeat purchase of either their products or services by listening to customer comments, suggestion, feedback, complaints, about the product or services they are offering, by also providing value adding services to the customer experience. Wirtz and Lwin (2009) defined repeat purchase as the willingness of an individual to re-patronize a service organization. In a relationship built on trust, commitment is engendered and then becomes a major predictor of future purchases. Customers regularly visit a particular firm based on their perception of trust-that is, they believe that the firm has their best interest at heart when providing a service (Caudill &Murphy 2000).

A Repeat Purchase is the buying of a product by a consumer of the same brand name previously bought on another occasion. A repeat purchase is often a measure of loyalty to a brand by consumers and is often taken into account by marketing research professionals to evaluate a business. Repeat purchase connotes buying goods and services from a particular outlet for the second time or continually. it is situation where a satisfied customer who has used a firm service or product continuously carryout shopping in that same organization. It is important to note that, for repeat purchase to take place, a customer should be satisfied. This will create loyal clients for retention and repeat purchase behaviour (Adiele&Opara 2014).Financial returns depend on increases in market share and repeat-purchase loyalty (which is known to increase (decrease) as a brand's market share increases (decreases) Ehrenberg et al., (2010) or increases in the degree of insensitivity customers have towards competing offers (Sharp, 2012).

In this paper we concentrate on assessing the former, we do not deny that some loyalty programs may be initiated in order to increase differentiation loyalty, raising barriers to entry for new brands and allowing firms to benefit through mechanisms such as price rises. For business organization to be sustainable there must be repeat purchases without defection to the competition, such organization sustainable in the medium to long term (Mpingangira, 2014). However, in the market that we investigate marketing attention is far more concerned with market share changes, and in this very frequent repeat-purchase market, it is doubtful that an increase in differentiation loyalty could occur without an accompanying increase change in repeat-purchase. Repeat purchase customer is influenced by certain characteristics of the organisation and its services. Repeat purchase by customers is also facilitated through relationship building and management. Since competition is intense, it is imperative for organization to build long term relationships with customer as against mere business transaction.

Customer retention

The key to customer retention is customer satisfaction. Customer retention means the firm keeps its customers by providing a great customer experience (Sima&Elham, 2015). Customer retention is the key to healthy business growth. Loyalty can help the business to retain most valuable customers. Loyalty reflects relationship development and retention reflects relationship continuity. Customer retention is a crucial component of customer relationship. The main aspect of customer retention is the emotions evoked by the customer experience combined with the organization's strong reputation. Customer retention is important to most firms because the cost of acquiring a new customer is greater than the cost of maintaining a relationship with a current customer (Sima&Elham, 2015).

Customer retention on the other hand is defined by different studies in different ways like Gerpott (2001), Rams (2001) and Schindler (2001). They stated that customer retention „is the continuity of the business relations between the customer and company‟. Customer retention is more than giving the customer what they expect; it is about exceeding their expectation so that they become loyal advocates for your brands. Retention and attraction of new customer are used as drivers for increasing market share and revenues (Rust, et al 1995). In the retention of customers, it is important for firm to know how to serve their customers because post sales services are the important drivers for customer retentions (Saeed, et al 2005).

Singh and Imran, (2012) retention programs aim to turn the occasional customer into a frequent customer; they would be more likely to recommend the business to their friends and relatives. They also raise the probability of changing customers from being a one or two item purchaser to purchasing several products. (Rocking, 2005) Because the high cost of losing customers is rising every day, firms seek new techniques to acquire, and retain their loyal customers. The service has long been an important factor in customer retention, and new research suggests its role is more critical than ever and will continue to grow in the future (Potter, 1994; Sima&Elham, 2015). Customer retention earns the business a good reputation and goodwill in a competitive market (Singh & Khan, 2012).

Customer retention is all about the customers and their experience. Customer relationship management is the practice of analyzing and using marketing and leveraging communication technologies to determine corporate practices and methods that maximize the lifetime value of each customer to the firm (Reinartz, 2004). The fact that customer retention is widely accepted as it is central objectives in relationship marketing. Because customer retention focuses on the repeated patronage of a marketer or supplier, it is closely related to repeat purchases (Hennig& Klee, 1997; Sima&Elham, 2015).

Several scholars have offered different conceptualizations of the concept of customer retention. In this regard, Customer retention is defined by Kihoro and Kepha (2014) as an attempt to prevent your customers from going to buy products from other firms competing with you in the market. Organizations perform many activities to ensure that their customers do not try the products of their competitors. Didia and Harry (2018) define customer retention as the commitment both on the part of the customer and the firm to maintain business transaction, and also as the commitment to maintain business transaction or exchange with a particular firm in an ongoing basis as customer retention.

Customer retention increases the capacity of firms to make more profits which will enable the firm to increase its investment expenditure in order to expand their operations, improve operational efficiency; thereby enhancing their competitive edge (Kihoro&Kepha, 2014). Implicit in the position stated above is that, loss of customers cause damage to the firm's image, reduce its ability to make profits and competitive advantage; hence the importance of customer retention cannot be overemphasized. In fact it has empirically verified by Reichheld and Sasser (2010) that it is five times more expensive to acquire a new customer than to maintain an existing customer; with the added proviso that when a customer is maintained, the acquisition cost is recovered from the customer's repeat purchases at the long-run which leads to the increase in the firm's profitability.

Customer retention has a direct impact on the life time value of customer; and that customer life-time value is a vitally important avenue for the firm to guarantee growth and sustainability, and achieve competitive edge (Gee, Coates & Nicholson, 2008). More so, Kotler and Armstrong (2008) posit that losing a single customer does not mean losing a single purchase; rather it entails losing the entire volume of purchases that the lost customer would have made over his/her life of patronizing the seller. Customer life time value is "the value of the entire stream of purchases that a customer would make over a lifetime of patronage" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Similarly, is concerned with repeat patronage; and that there is an association between customer retention and repeat-purchase, and between brand loyalty.

Empirical Review

Otineo (2018) carried out a study on the relationship between selective distribution strategies a competitive advantage of fast moving consumer goods companies in Kisumu Country using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analysis data and revealed that selective strategy provide both market and competitor intelligence to the manufacturer. Again, Adimo and Osodo (2017) investigated the association between selective strategy and performance of Sameer Africa Ltd located in Nairobi, Kenya, Informed by the study this paper discusses the extent to which channel selective strategy employed by Sameer Africa (K) Limited influenced the company's performance. The research employed a correlational research design. The study targeted 112 employees of Sameer Africa (K) Limited comprising of senior management, HODs and junior staff and 90 dealers based in Nairobi. 134 respondents were selected as the sample using stratified and simple random sampling methodologies. It was found that increasing selective strategy would lead to higher performances through revenue, market share, customer satisfaction and increased sales.

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between selective distribution and repeat purchase of soft drinks distributors in Rivers State.

Ho_2: There is no significant relationship between selective distribution and customer retention of soft drinks distributors in Rivers State.

Methodology

This study examined the relationship between selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction of soft drink distributors in Rivers State. The study adopted an explanatory research design. The population of the study was all registered soft drink distributors in Rivers State. There are twenty (20) soft drink distributors as obtained from Nigeria Directory (2023). This study adopted the entire population as the sample size, since the population is not too large. However, questionnaires were given to three (3) top managers from each distributor. Total the sample element to sixty (60) respondents. Data was collected from fifty-seven (57) respondents, using a structured questionnaire. The validity of the questionnaire was determined through academic scrutiny while its internal consistency was ascertained via Cronbach's Alpha test of reliability, with a threshold of 0.70. Table 1 below presents a summary of the result of test of reliability.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Items on All Variables

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
1	Selective distribution strategy	3	.754
2	Repeat purchase	3	.762
3	Customer retention	3	.779

Source: SPSS Output version 23.0

Table 1 indicates that all the variables have high Cronbach alpha; surpassing the threshold of 0.70. This means that the instrument was reliable. The Pearson Production Moment Correlation was the statistical tool used for data analyses, with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23.0.

Results

Table 2 Correlation between selective distribution and repeat purchase

		Selective distribution	Repeat purchase
Selective distribution	Pearson Correlation	1	.797**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	57	57
Repeat purchase	Pearson Correlation	.597**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	57	57

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

Table 2 shows the relationship between selective distribution and repeat purchase. As shown on the table, correlation coefficient is 0.797 indicating that selective distribution has a strong relationship with repeat purchase. Furthermore, the probability value is less than the critical value (i.e. $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), which indicates that the relationship between selective distribution and repeat purchase is statistically significant ($r = 0.797$, $N = 57$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between selective distribution and repeat purchase and accept the alternate hypothesis.

Table 3. Correlation between Selective Distribution and Customer Retention

		Selective Distribution	Customer Retention
Selective Distribution	Pearson Correlation	1	.896**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	57	57
Customer Retention	Pearson Correlation	.896**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	57	57

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

Table 3 shows the relationship between selective distribution and customer retention. As shown on the table, correlation coefficient is 0.896 indicating that selective distribution has a very strong relationship with customer retention. Furthermore, the probability value is less than the critical value (i.e. $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), which indicates that the relationship between selective distribution and customer retention is statistically significant ($r = 0.896$, $N = 57$, $p = 0.00 < 0.05$). Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between selective distribution and customer retention and accept the alternate hypothesis.

Discussion of findings

Results on the correlation matrix show the relationships between all the variables in the study. The results indicate that selective distribution has a high and very strong relationship with repeat purchase and customer retention indicated by 0.797 and 0.896. Furthermore, all the probability values are less than 0.07 that means the results are statistically significant. Based on these results, null hypotheses one and two (i.e. Ho_1 & Ho_2) which state that there is no significant relationship between selective distribution strategy and repeat purchase and customer retention were rejected and the alternate hypotheses accepted. These findings corroborate that of Otineo (2018) that carried out a study on the relationship between selective distribution strategies a competitive advantage of fast moving consumer goods companies in Kisumu Country using both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analysis data and revealed that selective strategy provide both market and competitor intelligence to the manufacturer. Similarly, the study of Adimo and Osodo (2017) that investigated the association between selective strategy and performance of Sameer Africa Ltd located in Nairobi, Kenya, Informed by the study this paper discusses the extent to which channel selective strategy employed by Sameer Africa (K) Limited influenced the company's performance. The research employed a correlational research design. The study targeted 112 employees of Sameer Africa (K) Limited comprising of senior management, HODs and junior staff and 90 dealers based in Nairobi. 134 respondents were selected as the sample using stratified and simple random sampling methodologies. It was found that increasing selective strategy would lead to higher performances through revenue, market share, customer satisfaction and increased sales.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on these findings, the study concluded that there is a significant and positive relationship between selective distribution strategy and customer satisfaction. This result corroborated the findings of previous studies. Therefore, recommend that soft drinks distributors in Rivers State should stay tuned to selective distribution strategy in order to embrace cost efficient and high the levels of satisfaction.

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