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Would Sales Employees' Customer-Oriented Selling Approaches Stimulate Customer Satisfaction in the Hospitality Industry?

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Abstract

Customer complaints and dissatisfaction have worsened nowadays because of poor quality service delivery by organizations' frontline sales personnel. However, the influence of customer-oriented salespersons' selling approaches necessary for achieving customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry was investigated. The exact objectives were to determine the influence of consultative selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, to examine the influence of solution selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, and to explore the influence of relationship selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. The study comprises customers of selected fast-food restaurants in Enugu metropolis whose population is non-finite. Using Cochran's formula, the sample size of 384 was obtained and subsequently, the survey method was adopted and copies of structured questionnaires were distributed to the 384 respondents who returned 300 properly filled copies of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha was used in conducting the reliability test and 0.895 was obtained, indicating that there is internal consistency. Furthermore, analysis of data was done using simple linear regression and the findings revealed that consultative selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the

hospitality industry. Similarly, it was revealed that solution selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Moreover, it was revealed that relationship selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Consequently, salesperson's customer-oriented selling traits such as consultative selling, solution selling, and relationship selling have proven to trigger customer satisfaction, thus, managers are encouraged to recruit salespersons with customer-oriented characteristics to enhance revenue generation and profitability via improved customer acquisition, relationship, satisfaction, retention, and loyalty.

Keywords: consultative selling; solution selling; relationship selling; customer satisfaction; hospitality industry; assimilation-contrast theory

JEL Classification: L8, L66, L83.

Introduction

It will be a travesty of justice if sales management is not geared towards recruiting, selecting, training, motivating, and evaluating salespeople (frontline sales employees) to fast-track job satisfaction that in the end culminates into customer satisfaction. The current trajectory in service, especially in the restaurant industry is that when sales managers perform their responsibility diligently by providing all the training and incentives that salespersons expect and deserve, they will be emotionally stable, and when they display this psychological equilibrium in their contact with their customers, the customers will in turn be satisfied. In light of this, Okolo et al. (2024) exposed that most firms struggle to provide out-of-the-box quality services and satisfaction, to earn unwavering loyalty from their numerous customers. Ultimately, customer satisfaction begets repeat patronage and loyalty. Thus, at the behest of the sales manager, the verbigeration of customer satisfaction to most company executives, especially the salespeople must reign supreme and must not happen as a surprise. Hence, as marketing practices and trends change, companies are currently advocating and embracing a paradigm shift from product orientation to service cum customer orientation, to create positive customer value through thorough customer management (Yeo et al., 2019; Kumar & Venkatesan, 2006).

The rationale behind the insight to reverence customers is consequent to the axiom that the satisfaction of customers has become a major challenge to many companies' survival in today's highly competitive and ever-changing marketing environment, given that consumers have become more educated, sophisticated (Okolo, 2019) and choosy over what they need and want (Jobber et al., 2019). Seemingly, orthodox selling is no longer profitable since it focuses a salesperson's attention limitedly on having adequate understanding and knowledge of a company's products and competencies (product-oriented and transactional selling) (Bayaa et al., 2012).

Organizations have truly metamorphosed into customer-centric selling approaches (customer-oriented selling) that consider the customer first (i.e. customer sovereignty). Nguyen et al. (2022) admitted that customer-oriented selling refers to the empathetic customization or personalization of selling. In other words, organizations tailor their selling activities to individual customers' desires, preferences, and choices based on their unique characteristics.

Customer-oriented selling refers to a salesperson's genuine identification of customer requirements through the adoption of soft selling strategies, geared towards encouraging a satisfying buying decision (Park & Tran, 2018). Incidentally, long-term customer satisfaction and organizational profitability have been linked to customer-oriented selling behavior (Park & Tran, 2018). So, the display of customer-oriented selling behavior helps the salesperson in providing top-notch services, thus driving towards achieving customer satisfaction and improving firms' competitiveness (Goff et., 1997). Kavoosi et al. (2014) declared that a customer-oriented salesperson understands customer's needs and wants and provides them innovatively and satisfactorily. Kavoosi et al. (2014) argued that higher job satisfaction places a company's salesperson on a higher pedestal towards showcasing customer-oriented selling behavior that may lead to improved customer satisfaction, trust, symbiotic relationships, and loyalty. Nguyen et al. (2022) found that salesperson performance improved substantially through the adoption of customer-oriented behaviors.

Furthermore, in the restaurant domain, no matter how companies assemble their salespeople and related resources to render excellent services to customers, customer complaints keep resonating. For example, customers will always complain about poor quality services such as unavailability of their favorite meals, costly meals, smaller meal portions, unpalatable meals, salty meals, service delays, dirty and unfashionable servicescape, cranky and kooky service providers, other customers' disturbances and service distortions, poor customer-waiter/waitress communication, etc. Despite all these, services can never be 100% (Ohanagorom et al., 2022), given that the variability of service makes it difficult to satisfy customer needs.

However, literature and studies in this area are scarce (Okolo et al., 2024; Goswani & Sinha, 2019; El Bayaa et al., 2009), and emphatically, no study in Nigeria within the researchers' realm of knowledge has explored customer satisfaction while probing the influence of consultative selling, solution selling, and relationship selling approaches. Against this backdrop, this study fills this knowledge gap by examining the influence of those selling approaches on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, from the Nigerian context. Thus, the incorporation of those selling approaches by human resources, sales, and marketing managers of hospitality firms into their customer/service-oriented corporate culture should be sacrosanct to motivate customer repeat patronage and loyalty given that customers are invaluable

assets that deserve unwavering high-touch and undiluted memorable service experience.

Literature Review

Salesperson's Service Quality Delivery and Customer Satisfaction

A company's salesperson is its frontline staff or employee; they provide an interface by reaching out interactively and one-on-one to customers. They are those responsible for enabling service promises being initiated by the internal company employees (management), via internal marketing relationships, as well as fulfilling the promises to customers via interactive marketing. However, customer satisfaction is the crux of all marketing operations, being a precursor to service quality (Nebo & Okolo, 2016; Okolo et al., 2015). In the restaurant industry, customer satisfaction is a critical function of a salesperson's superior service quality (Karim, 2020) and a mediator between service quality and customer loyalty. In turn, service quality is a customer's perception of the relationship between expected and delivered service experience (Siddiquei & Kumar, 2019). Sometimes, customers pay less attention to product quality and focus their interest more on service quality. Despite quality products, salespersons are expected to deliver exceptional service quality to their clients to ensure customer satisfaction and higher organizational performance (Siddiquei & Kumar, 2019). Unequivocally, what makes a salesperson outstanding among others is the quality of sales services provided to customers. Zeithaml et al. (2019) emphasized that providing customer satisfaction is a function of a tripartite collaborative effort and relationships between the service provider (waiter/waitress), the customer, other customers within the service factory, delivery arena, or servicescape, and the physical evidence within the servicescape upon which the service depends on to be effectively and efficiently delivered to the customers. The company, the salesperson, and the customer occupy a key role-performing service triangle positions to enable seamless service production in the service factory (Zeithaml et al., 2018).

Moreover, the service quality (SERVQUAL) scale developed by Parasunaman et al. (1985) has been the universally accepted scale for measuring customer satisfaction in the service industry (Karim, 2020). The dimensions of SERVQUAL include responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. To deliver customer-orientated selling attributes and satisfaction, salespersons must possess these SERVQUAL attributes both in the short and long run. However, Zeithaml et al. (2018) outlined four cardinal elements that the sales or human resource manager must establish as a prerequisite for guaranteeing the adoption of the SERVQUAL model in service production firms (restaurant business typically). These cardinal elements entail that the sales or human resource manager must hire qualified salespersons, offer them the requisite training needed for delivering top-notch services to customers, provide the enabling customer-driven service designs and standards (i.e. the required supporting systems), and retain the best customer-oriented employees.

Customer-Oriented Selling Approaches and Hypotheses Development

Consultative Selling Approach

In today's modern business world, sales employees have gone beyond being ordinary order takers to being order getters by moving out of their comfort zones to identify customer product and service purchase problems and proffering lasting solutions. That is why Goswani and Sinha (2019) accentuated that the emergence of consultative selling is to provide a lasting solution to selling challenges. Anderson et al. (2007) expatiated that by listening to customers attentively and skillfully identifying and providing lasting solutions to their problems, a consultative selling approach is initiated and fulfilled. Suomala et al. (2012) elucidated that rather than being ordinary prompters to customers, salespersons need adequate information and knowledge to offer substantial professional advice that is capable of satisfying the needs and wants of their numerous customers.

However, salespersons' consultative selling approach is the process of interfacing with customers to earn their contributions regarding their feelings, opinions, and position in the course of selling products and services to establish a win-win situation. Castillo (2018) defined consultative selling as the process of engagement in which frontline employees reach out to customers to execute a selling activity. Because of this, Liu and Leach (2001) added that consultative salespersons rather than promoting a product, serve as advisors who provide insightful information and customized solutions to customers' problems. According to them, this customized solution builds a hedge against customer brand switching and guarantees staunch loyalty. Anderson et al. (2007) admitted that salespeople act professionally when they consult with customers in the course of selling. So, the rationale behind this is that in consultative selling, a two-way symmetric cooperative agenda where the customers exchange valuable sales information with the salespersons is initiated and established.

Furthermore, Castillo (2017) highlighted that the five consultative selling phases include: customer-frontline employee connection establishment, customers' need identification, provision of lasting customer solutions based on specific need discovery, weaving customer sound decisions around a salesperson's sales closure, and establishing and sustaining permanent rapport with the customer, leading to retention and loyalty. To underscore this, the research conducted in the Indian banking industry to find out how consultative selling impacted customer satisfaction revealed that the relationship between them was positive and significant (Goswani & Sinha, 2019). Sequel to these discussions we therefore propose that:

H1: Consultative selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Solution Selling Approach

Every customer has a problem of needs and wants, wanting to be solved or resolved by the salesperson or sales force. It might be the need for food, water, clothing, shelter, sex, association or relationship, security, self-esteem, self-actualization, etc. That is one of the reasons why smart salespersons initiate cross-selling and up-selling techniques intended to create more value for the customer's money. However, solution selling approach dates back to the early 1960s (Biggemann et al., 2013). Recall that over the decades, solution selling has gained prominence in many organizations, having evolved as a paradigm shift, not just to provide sales of discrete products and services to customers, but to provide a packaged lasting solution to their problems (Ali, 2019). von Bischhoffshausen and Fromm (2014) added that many businesses have undergone a rapid transformation into selling solutions, from that of selling products in piece meals. Salonen et al. (2020) argued that the management of many organizations has integrated their salespeople into this strategic behavioral switching to satisfy their customers. de Ruyter et al. (2019) posited that quality service delivery is a major aspect of this transformation from selling products separately to selling a combined bundle of products. de Ruyter et al. (2019:16) specified that "this focus on solutions required resellers to be ambidextrous through building a combination of sales and services knowledge and skills."

Substantively, solution selling deemphasizes transactional selling while encouraging long-term relationship building and sustenance between the salesperson and the customer (Tuli et al. 2007). Without a doubt, solution selling is synonymous with system selling; value creation through efficient delivery of a packaged solution to a customer's problem (Jobber et al., 2019). Jobber et al. (2019) defined solution selling as a collaborative effort between the buyer and the seller in which the latter helps in identifying the former's problems and offers packaged products and services as lasting solutions. Interestingly, Microsoft discovered that solution selling is one of the best-selling strategies for creating business wealth and thus, focuses on offering business solutions to customers (Zoltners et al., 2001).

Salonen et al. (2020) indicated in their study that companies had started employing solution salespeople despite salespersons' negative attitudes towards its adoption. According to Salonen et al. (2020), managerial success and survival are dependent on the choice of solution salespersons who would deliver value-laden selling satisfaction to customers. Referring to these contributions, we hypothesize that:

H2: Solution selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Relationship Selling Approach

Salespeople adequately establish and sustain long-lasting relationships between their customers and the firms by creating positive and supreme customer experience and value (Valenzuela et al., 2014). Through this filial behavior, a salesperson's efforts

sustainably metamorphose into high sales performance for their firm as well as customer satisfaction (Uduyana et al, 2019; Amyx et al., 2016). Nonetheless, relationship selling is a managerial process of establishing, lubricating, and sustaining long-term and mutually beneficial rapport between a company's salespersons and their customers. Pop et al. (2011) avowed that it refers to major customer partnership engagement, aimed at boosting sales and customer satisfaction. It connotes that a salesperson requires adequate knowledge and the tenets of customer orientation to transform his or her selling situations and encounters into customer patronage (El Bayaa, 2009) and repurchase behavior. In addition, Ernest (2011) remarked that the success of a relationship selling strategy hinges firmly on salespersons' improved knowledge of customer satisfaction and retention strategies. Consequently, relationship selling fosters tremendous interaction and builds trust between the salesperson and the customer (Masturoh, 2020).

Incidentally, relationship selling evolved from the relationship marketing concept and goes beyond bounds towards lubricating other selling approaches, such as transactional, provocative, social, partnership, consultative, adaptive, and solution selling. This is because, in relationship selling, the salesperson or sales force sees the customer as members of the same household with the same problem seeking the same solution. Ernest (2011) lamented that relationship selling is still nascent and has not triumphed in the Nigerian business environment due to increased customer brand switching. El Bayaa (2009) in his study to unravel what drives businesses towards adopting relationship selling, revealed that all the drivers which include adaptive selling, customer-oriented selling, and problem-solving (solution selling) have significant and positive relationships with relationship selling. So, having made these convictions, we hypothesize that:

H3: Relationship selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. The conceptual framework for these constructs is shown in Figure 1.

Customer Satisfaction in the Restaurant Industry

Customer satisfaction is sacrosanct for organizational development and survival since it attracts loyalty, positive publicity, repurchase behavior, and overall competitive advantage for the firm (Okolo et al., 2021). Since the marketing environment has become more dynamic (Okolo et al., 2024), organizations are working hard to differentiate themselves from competitors by consistently offering undiluted quality service and satisfaction to their customers (Okolo et al., 2015). Irrefutably, the soul of marketing is customer satisfaction (Ivkov et al., 2014), and for many business managers, customer satisfaction has become a doctrine that resonates across almost all businesses (Mmamel & Okolo, 2022; Okolo et al., 2018) in such a manner that attaining customer satisfaction requires thorough customer research (Okolo & Agu, 2015) to identify customer needs and buying dispositions. Customer satisfaction as a business aphorism must therefore be handled with caution since dissatisfied

customers do not only complain, and switch brands and companies, rather, they engage other customers in negative word-of-mouth (negative publicity) about the poor treatment they experienced from service providers (Arefi & Hossain, 2021; Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). This is because consumers form a service quality image consequent upon the attributes displayed by the salesperson in the course of service delivery, which affects customer satisfaction (van Scheers, 2016). Okolo et al. (2021) argued that customer feedback is an invaluable lubricant to customer satisfaction, so, businesses should solicit feedback for future quality service improvement and satisfaction.

In addition, services are full of experience and credence qualities, unlike physical goods that possess search quality (Zeithaml et al., 2018). Nowadays, achieving customer satisfaction has been a serious challenge to the successful management of restaurant businesses (Kanchanamala, 2019). In the service/hospitality industry, achieving customer satisfaction is not easy because of several characteristics of services. Thus, as a result of intangibility, inseparability, variability, perishability, immeasurability, and ownership of services; service characteristics, it becomes very onerous to provide absolute satisfaction in the restaurant business. For instance, variability of services means that no two services can ever be the same, depending on who provides it, and in which mood; for whom is it provided and in what disposition; who and who are within the servicecape and how compatible are they (subjective norm); what makes up other physical evidence at the time and situation the service is provided, etc? All these are the key service influences that have to be factored into measuring the level of customer satisfaction while referring to service. Similarly, service inseparability strictly indicates that services are provided by both the provider and customer, and a lot of interactions are involved (Zeithaml et al., 2018). The level of interaction as well as the company's service design and standard may determine the degree of satisfaction given that the provider and client may differ in many ways. For service immeasurability, customers cannot weigh or gauge service in terms of gram, kilogram, and ton (especially for physical weight), and attach value to it before actual purchase as they would normally lift packaged or manufactured goods, feel it, weigh it, and attach value to it before purchase. The same goes for intangibility, perishability, and ownership of services.

Moreover, when a salesperson meticulously provides all the needs and wants of the customer in collaboration with the customer (co-production of service), satisfaction will be uniquely and ultimately achieved. Customer satisfaction entails the establishment of equilibrium between customer expectation of service and the perceived performance of the salesperson in providing a memorable service experience. It is the disparity between customer expectations of service and the real-time service experience (Kanchanamala, 2019). Interestingly, restaurant companies strive hard to retain their customers by improving customer satisfaction (Ivkov et al., 2014). Moreover, Ivkov et al. (2014) posited that gathering accurate data about

customers is very important in restaurants since it will support the achievement of customer satisfaction by providing lasting solutions to their problems. Ivkov et al. (2014:370) stated that "food quality, service quality, cleanliness, restaurant atmosphere, convenient location, quick service, and reasonable price and value, which also implicate revisit intentions" are the major determinants of customer satisfaction. Mahato and Goet (2020) revealed that customer satisfaction was positively influenced by salesperson's service quality. Also, the study done by Ha and Jang (2010) revealed that customer satisfaction was influenced by salesperson's provision of tasty food and quality services to the customers.

Assimilation-Contrast Theory of Customer Satisfaction

In reality, customers' enthusiasm to satisfy their daily needs is growing tremendously and companies are working round the clock with customers in the hospitality industry to make this a dream come true (Okolo et al., 2024; Ohanagorom et al., 2022; Mmamel & Okolo, 2022). This paper is anchored on the assimilation-contrast theory which is an integration of assimilation and contrast theories (Simon & Thomas, 2016). This theory is relevant because, in the hospitality industry, the frontline salespeople strive to achieve customer satisfaction by trying to meet customers' expectations. Out-and-out, this theory establishes the need to balance customer expectations with product performance (benefits) and service experience. Incidentally, customers depend on service providers as well as themselves (service co-production process) to bring satisfaction to fruition. By this, Okolo et al. (2024) reiterated that in delivering customer satisfaction, service providers try to engage customers in co-creating a memorable customer service experience in the service environment. Despite all these commitments, service experience keeps deteriorating in the service industry; with the restaurant industry being inclusive.

However, the assimilation-contrast theory propounded by Anderson (1973) proposed that customer satisfaction is the result of the balance between product performance or service experience and customer prior expectations (Eleboda, 2017). Customers instinctively possess a certain level of expectations (Kotler et al., 2018) before they purchase and consume (edible) or use (inedible) a product or service. Consequently, they seek to put the perceived performance or the benefit offered by a product or service, and their prior expectations into perspective and at equilibrium. However, when equilibrium occurs (benefit equals expectation), satisfaction will occur. Besides, when there is disequilibrium in the positivity (benefit surpasses expectation); customer expectation is exceeded and delightedness will surface and the customer may engage in positive word-of-mouth. On the other hand, when there is disequilibrium on the negativity (expectation surpasses benefit); cognitive dissonance (dissatisfaction) will occur and the customer may switch brands and may most times engage in negative word-of-mouth. In reference to this, Oranusi et al. (2021) illustrated that customer dissatisfaction generates complaints.

In conclusion, the assimilation theory's position is that if the discrepancy between expectation and performance is relatively low, it becomes manageable and as such, the consumer will make adjustments to balance the differences in his or her perceptions of product performance or service experience, with prior expectations (Simon & Thomas, 2016). Elaborating further, Eleboda (2017) argued that the assimilation-contrast theory suggests that performance may fall short of expectation, though, if it is still within a customer's latitude of acceptance, the customer may disregard the discrepancy and assimilation will occur and the perceived performance will stand. On the contrary, Kinisa (2019) assured that if the performance falls within the consumer's latitude of rejection, a contrast will occur as the discrepancy would have been magnified, and the consumer will reject the product or service, after having experienced dissatisfaction or cognitive dissonance.

Consistent with the theory's assertions, customers who visit fast-food restaurants to eat, who feel that the services rendered by the salespersons (waiters/waitresses) are still within their acceptance domain, end up being satisfied in disregard to any extraneous variable that might try to disfigure their state of mind. In contrast, customers of fast-food restaurants who have the penchant to reject the services rendered to them, display cognitive dissonance by magnifying the discrepancy between expectation and performance.

Methodology

The survey method was adopted in this study and a structured questionnaire was administered to customers of select fast-food restaurants in Enugu metropolis to gather primary data. The population comprises regular customers of Celebrities, Genesis, Kilimanjaro, Crunchies, The Roots, Chicken Republics, Chitis, Pizza Jungle, Duo Pizzeria, and KFC in Enugu metropolis. These restaurants were chosen because they are more favored by the customers in the metropolis. However, Cochran's formula for sample size determination for a non-finite population was used to determine the sample size of 384. The convenience sampling method was adopted in selecting the respondents in the study and out of the 384 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 300 copies were returned. The choice of convenience sampling was premeditated by the fact that fast-food restaurant customers are easily accessible in the restaurants' servicescape. Also, the restaurants were equally accessible to the researchers in terms of location. For the validity of the instrument, content validity was used in which marketing and management research experts edited and modified the wordings and tenses of the research instrument. For the reliability test, a pilot survey was conducted by distributing 20 copies of the research instrument to respondents who were purposefully targeted. After one week, the 20 copies were duly collected and subjected to Cronbach's alpha test, and the value of 0.895 was realized, indicating that there is an internal consistency of the research instrument. However, those 20 respondents that were used in conducting a pilot survey were not used in the main or final study. Afterward, the hypotheses were tested using the simple linear

regression analytical technique with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS: version 22). The simple linear technique was used because it requires minimum data preparation and can deal with missing data. It is also easy to compute, interpret, and explain, given that it contains one independent and one dependent variable. Similarly, it can handle large datasets.

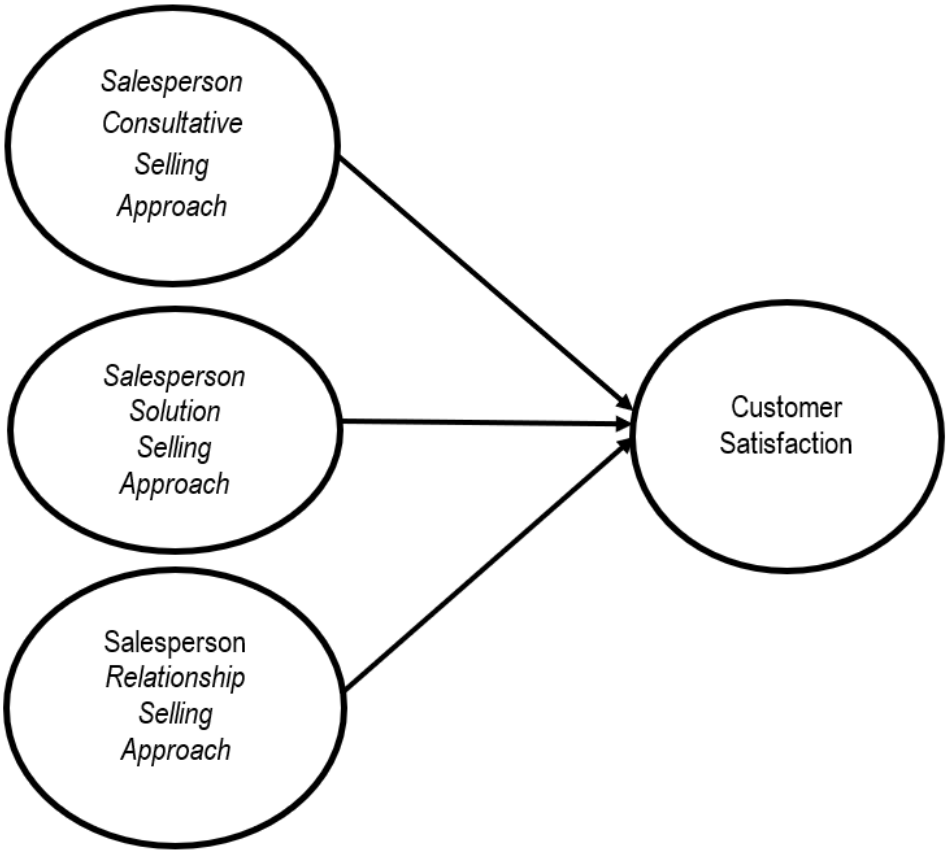


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

3.1. Data Presentation and Analysis

Data generated from customers of the sampled customers of select fast-food restaurants in Enugu metropolis were presented using descriptive statistics and analyzed using the simple linear regression statistical tool.

Table 1. Responses on the influence of consultative selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry

S/No	Questionnaire items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (Freq)
		Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	
1	The salesperson counsels me over my choice of food	80	61	55	58	46	300
2	The salesperson interfaces with me over my choice of soft drink	89	67	50	54	40	300
3	The salesperson often demands my opinion on the prices of their food and drinks	77	86	47	53	37	300
4	The salesperson invites my consent regarding whether to turn the AC on or off	85	70	51	51	43	300
5	The salesperson invites me to revisit them and inquiries how I feel after receiving their restaurant services	79	75	54	50	42	300
6	The salesperson often solicits my suggestion (feedback) on where they need to make some improvement in serving customers	81	57	40	70	52	300
TOTAL		491	416	297	336	260	1800

Source: fieldwork, 2023

Table 1 indicated that 491 strongly agreed, 416 indicated that they agreed, 297 indicated that they were neutral, 336 indicated that they disagreed and 260 indicated that they strongly disagreed respectively. This implies that the influence of consultative selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Hypothesis One

H1: Consultative selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Table 2: Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.988[a]	.975	.975	.22000	.178

a. Predictors: (Constant), Consultative Selling

b. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Table 3: ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1714.841	1	1714.814	35429.230	.000[b]
	Residual	43.465	898	.048		
	Total	1758.306	899			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

b. Predictors: (Constant), Consultative Selling

Table 4: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.161	.018		8.762	.000
	Consultative Selling	.967	.005	.988	188.227	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Interpretation

Table 3 indicates that the regression sum of squares (1714.841) is greater than the residual sum of squares (43.465), which indicates that more of the variation in the dependent variable is not explained by the model. The significance value of the F statistics (0.000) is less than 0.05, which means that the variation explained by the model is due to chance. In Table 2, R which equals the correlation coefficient has a value of 0.988, which indicates that consultative selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. R square which is the coefficient of determination shows that 97.5 % of the variation in customer satisfaction is explained by the model. In the linear regression model, the error of the estimate is low, with a 0.22000 value. The Durbin-Watson statistics of 0.178 which is less than 2 indicates that there is no autocorrelation. However, the consultative selling coefficient of 0.988 indicates that there is a significant and positive influence of consultative selling on

customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, which is significant statistically as shown in Tables 4 and 13 (with t = 188.227). We therefore accept the hypothesis as tentatively stated.

Table 5. Responses on the influence of solution selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry

S/No	Questionnaire items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (Freq)
		Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	
1	The salesperson gives me all the information I need about the available food and drinks they have	83	68	45	54	50	300
2	The salesperson provides up-selling service to me by letting me purchase larger quantities or ration of food at a discount rate	75	76	60	44	45	300
3	The salesperson guides me in choosing the kind of food that will be better for me at a particular time of the day	80	61	45	64	50	300
4	The salesperson educates me on the ingredients and nutritional value of the food I choose to eat	63	60	59	63	55	300
5	The salesperson informs me that they can provide catering services and space for any of my events	67	74	51	50	58	300

6	The salesperson identifies and encourages me to have a trial of certain food I have not eaten before that will be good for my health	70	62	65	52	51	300
TOTAL		438	401	325	327	309	1800

Source: fieldwork, 2023

In Table 5, 438 indicated strongly agree, 401 indicated agree, 325 indicated neutrality, 327 indicated disagree and 309 indicated strongly disagree respectively in their responses. This implies that influence of solution selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Hypothesis Two

H2: Solution selling has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Table 6: Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.970[a]	.942	.941	.34619	.073

a. Predictors: (Constant), Solution Selling
b. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Table 7: ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1733.107	1	1733.107	14460.644	.000[b]
	Residual	107.625	898	.120		
	Total	1840.732	899			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction
b. Predictors: (Constant), Solution Selling

Table 8: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.203	.028		7.276	.000
	Solution Selling	.980	.008	.970	120.252	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Interpretation

It is indicated in Table 7 that the regression sum of squares (1733.107) is greater than the residual sum of squares (107.625), which indicates that more of the variation in the dependent variable is not explained by the model. The significance value of the F statistics (0.000) is less than 0.05, which means that the variation explained by the model is due to chance. R in Table 6 is the correlation coefficient with a value of 0.970 indicating that solution selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. R square which is the coefficient of determination shows that 94.2 % of the variation in customer satisfaction is explained by the model. Hence, the error of the estimate is low with a 0.34619 value as shown in the linear regression model. There is no autocorrelation as indicated by the Durbin-Watson statistics of 0.073 which is less than 2. However, the solution selling coefficient of 0.970 indicates that there is a significant and positive influence of solution selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, which is statistically significant as shown in Tables 8 and 13 (with t = 120.252). Therefore, we accept the hypothesis.

Table 9. Responses on the influence of relationship selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry

S/ No	Questionnaire items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (Freq)
		Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	Freq	
1	The waiter or waitress welcomes me by my name and inquires how I'm doing while serving my meal	60	53	54	65	68	300
2	The parking attendant ensures that my vehicle is well parked each time I arrive at the restaurant	86	74	60	45	35	300
3	The salesperson jests with me on the latest happenings in the country whenever I visit their restaurant	79	70	64	47	40	300
4	The salesperson asks me about services rendered at other fast-food restaurants in town	90	85	49	43	33	300

5	The salesperson enquires from me to know whether I am satisfied after receiving their services	85	70	62	48	35	300
6	The salesperson waves goodbye at me and encourages me to revisit their restaurant	88	80	55	39	38	300
TOTAL		488	432	344	287	249	1800

Source: fieldwork, 2023

Table 9, indicated that 488 strongly agreed, 432 agreed, 344 were neutral, 287 disagreed and 249 strongly disagreed respectively in their responses. This implies that the influence of relationship selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Hypothesis Three

H3: Relationship selling has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Table 10: Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.953[a]	.908	.908	.42670	.048

a. Predictors: (Constant), Relationship Selling
b. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Table 11: ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1616.256	1	1616.256	8876.840	.000[b]
	Residual	163.504	898	.182		
	Total	1779.760	899			

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction
b. Predictors: (Constant), Relationship Selling

Table 12: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.208	.039		-5.303	.000
	Relationship Selling	.991	.011	.953	94.217	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction

Interpretation

As indicated in Table 11, the regression sum of squares (1616.254) is greater than the residual sum of squares (162.504), which indicates that more of the variation in the dependent variable is not explained by the model. The significance value of the F statistics (0.000) is less than 0.05, which means that the variation explained by the model is due to chance. R in Table 10 is the correlation coefficient with a value of 0.953 indicating that relationship selling has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. R square which is the coefficient of determination shows that 90.8 % of the variation in customer satisfaction is explained by the model. Hence, the error of the estimate is low with a 0.42670 value as shown in the linear regression model. There is no autocorrelation as indicated by the Durbin-Watson statistics of 0.048 which is less than 2. However, the relationship selling coefficient of 0.953 indicates that there is a significant and positive influence of relationship selling on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry, which is statistically significant as shown in Tables 12 and 13 (with t = 94.217). The hypothesis is thus accepted as earlier proposed. In addition, the overall results of the hypotheses testing are shown in Table 13 & Figure 2.

Table 13: Result Summary from Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesized Relationship	Hypotheses	Correlation Coefficients	T-Values	Conclusion
Consultative Selling Approach	H1	0.988	188.227	Accepted
Solution Selling Approach	H2	0.970	120.252	Accepted
Relationship Selling Approach	H3	0.953	94.217	Accepted

Discussion

It was found in hypothesis one that salesperson's consultative selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry ($r = 0.994$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that when the waiters/waitresses involve the customers in co-creating and co-producing the service (consultatively); ie when they collaborate with their clients in serving them food and drinks, they will be very happy and may likely revisit the restaurant for more service encounter and experience. This existential act may trigger their clients to engage other potential customers in positive word-of-mouth for the restaurant. Notedly, being a consultant entails being an expert and being responsive in applying in-depth knowledge and experience in offering customized and exceptional services to customers. This is related to the study

conducted by (Goawani & Sinha, 2019), where it was revealed that customer satisfaction was positively and significantly influenced by salesperson's consultation with customers in executing sales in the banking industry.

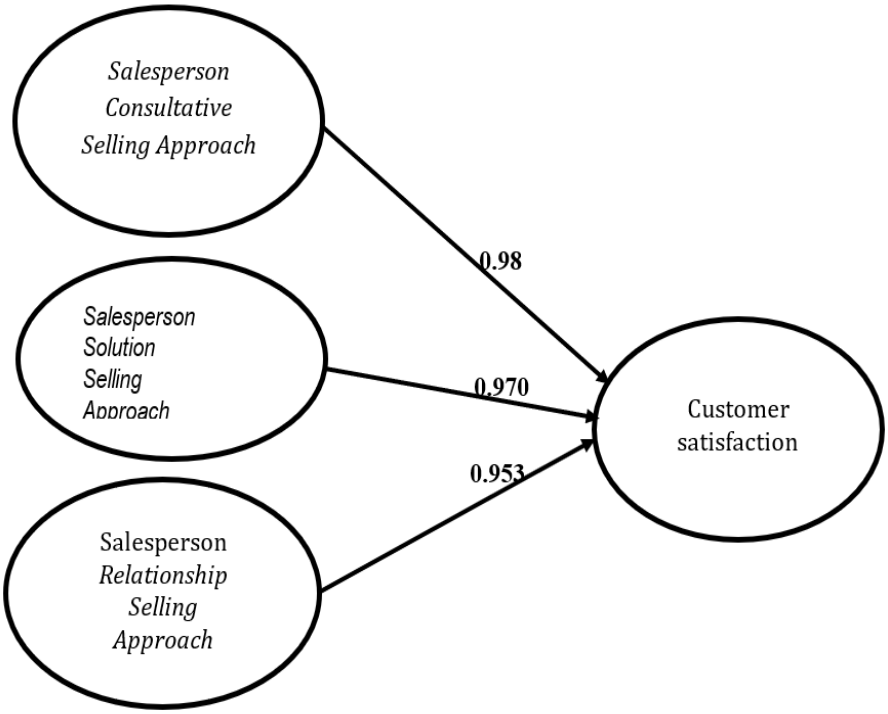


Figure 2: Hypotheses Results.

Similarly, it was also revealed that salesperson's solution selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry ($r = 0.991$, $p < 0.05$). Solution selling means providing a packaged and lasting solution to a customer's service problems. It means that all that the customer requires in terms of food, drinks, cigarettes, etc is provided as a "single package" instead of purchasing them as separate items. This is an indication that when a salesperson exercises responsiveness, empathy, and assurance in attending to customer service needs in the restaurant, they will feel happy and confident that their problems are being completely resolved as a single sales package, thus encouraging revisit, repurchase intentions, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Salonen et al. (2020) depicted that managerial success and survival depend on the choice of solution salespersons that are expected to deliver value-laden selling satisfaction to customers.

Furthermore, it was found that salesperson's relationship selling approach has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry ($r = 0.987$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that when a salesperson establishes and sustains long-lasting relationships with their customers, customer satisfaction will be guaranteed at every service sales touchpoint. Interestingly, Okolo et al. (2024) found in their study that customer satisfaction was significantly and positively influenced by a salesperson's relationship selling strategy. This implies that when the salesperson builds and sustains long-lasting rapport with customers, customer satisfaction will be highly improved. Consequently, improved customer relationship leads to customer retention and loyalty (Obeta et al., 2024). Similarly, Bayaa et al. (2009) revealed in their study that relationship selling was significantly influenced by variables that generated and improved customer satisfaction. Furthermore, Boles et al. (2000) supported this finding having revealed that interactive intensity, mutual disclosure, and cooperative intention, which were the constructs of relationship selling had a significant effect on salesperson performance.

Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The findings of this study revealed that consultative selling, solution selling, and relationship selling approaches have significant and positive influences on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Nonetheless, everyday experience shows that while the salespersons strive to deliver customer satisfaction, customers still complain about being poorly attended to in the restaurant outlets where they find themselves. However, customer-oriented selling approaches give room for customer co-production of services, customer compatibility (Zeithaml et al., 2018), quality service, satisfaction, and loyalty. When frontline employees consult customers to give their input on what they need and how they want it, they will feel more inspired to even offer the company invaluable feedback. For example, in the US Chipotle restaurants, famous with its Mexican Grill, customers are allowed to choose the ingredients that form part of their menu (Kotler et al., 2027), making them part and parcel of what they eat. The cooking in the restaurant is done in the presence of the customers instead of behind the scenes or closed doors. This instance is typically a customer-oriented prescription about what customers truly want to consume. Hence, management must train and impart customer-centric knowledge to their frontline staff in terms of providing eatery and drinking services, alongside establishing and sustaining high-touch relationships to win customer repeat purchases and loyalty. Similarly, customers enjoy the benefit of solution buying because they love to acquire the service they need from a single provider, rather than buy their needs from different service providers, in piecemeal. This makes purchase less arduous and less expensive for customers and encourages the establishment and sustenance of a compelling and enduring relationship with the service provider. When a kind of collaboration between the customer and the salespeople is enshrined in a company's corporate strategy and culture, the customer will feel a sense of belonging and may

even embark on positive publicity for the company. Furthermore, the company will leverage positive word-of-mouth to seamlessly acquire more customers, sustain their lifetime values, and guarantee the generation of more revenue and profitability.

Limitations and Future Research Focus

This study will be more representative and robust in the future if the scope goes beyond one state in Southeastern Nigeria to cover other states in the region such Imo, Abia, Anambra, and Ebonyi, as well as other big business cities in Nigeria such as Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Owerri, Abuja, Aba, Kano, Kaduna, Calabar, Ibadan etc. This will guarantee great insights and encourage the exploration of the activities of salespeople in co-creating restaurant services with customers in those locations. Secondly, expanding the constructs by adding missionary selling and team selling approaches will make the study more novel and interesting. Moreover, focusing the study on business-to-business dealings will expose how salespersons in chain restaurants serve as feeders to food wholesalers who sell directly to caterers. In addition, expanding the research to explore other service domains such as transportation, telecommunication, banking, insurance, pension, accommodation/lodging, barbing, laundering, etc. will strengthen research of this nature. Similarly, if the study entirely delves into manufactured goods, instead of focusing on service, more insights will be gained. Furthermore, using a more advanced data analytical technique like the multiple regression and partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM) will be more rigorous as it will significantly reveal the relationships existing between the indicators and the constructs as well as the extent of the potency of the indicators on the constructs.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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