



SALES AGILITY AND PERFORMANCE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT: *The study examined “sales agility and performance of small and medium enterprises SME in Port Harcourt”. The population of study covered production, internal/quality control managers, sale managers and salesmen for Ever living Products, Mini Penny Enterprises Nigeria Company and Global-Ainsworth Engineering Nig. Limited at Ada George, Port Harcourt. The population was 100 comprising of managers of the selected SME in Port Harcourt. The judgmental sampling technique was used to derive the sample size of the four selected tourism destinations. The sample size of 60 cadres of managers of the selected firms. The study, based on the finding, concluded that there is a significant relationship between alertness, accessibility, swiftness and flexibility and performances of small and medium enterprises in Port Harcourt. The study recommended that the management of SME in Port Harcourt should build alertness and develop their adaptive capacity to change and respond efficiently and effectively in a timely and cost-effective manner in the internal and external environments. Also, the management of SMEs owners should always provide necessary access to data to encourage changes in the business environment that might impact on businesses to make necessary adjustment for better performance.*

KEYWORDS: Sales, Agility, performance, SME.



INTRODUCTION

Today, enormous changes are associated with the business environment. Business environment can be volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (White, 2013). What may be relevant today, becomes obsolete tomorrow. Therefore, business organizations who decide to be docile in volatile business environments could easily be muscled out of business in the long run.

Multinational and large organizations appear to be better at adjusting and adapting to changes more swiftly than small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are strategic to the survival of many economies of the world, this is occasioned by their contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of many countries. They help in the employment generation and play their part in both service sector and production sectors in many economies.

Govuzela and Mafini (2019) posited that SMEs played a strategic role in the economic performance of any country. This role played by SMEs can be in service offering and production of tangible goods.

On the other hand, organizations are always conscious of their performance as this determines whether they will survive in the ever-competitive business environment or not. Laying credence to this assertion, Arokodare and Asikhia (2020), who opined that organizations in many countries are always looking to maintain business performance as their survival are contingent on it. Therefore, organizations that might survive in turbulent business environment are those that are flexible, responsive and dynamic in nature. These factors such as flexibility, responsiveness and dynamic are associated with companies that are agile which is coined as agility.

Over the decades, sale agility has been of highly competitive advantage of firms over their rivals. However, in spite of the relevance of sale agility, many firms, especially in Port Harcourt metropolis, lack the ability to quickly detect changes, opportunities and threats. Also, some of the small and medium scale enterprises fail to access the relevant data required to boost their performance, while some are unable to implement decisions quickly, which has significantly hampered their performance over their rivals. It is against this background this study is carried out to examine sales agility and performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt as the main objective of the study. Based on the main objective, the following specific objectives were examined. They are as follows:

- i. To examine the relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMES) In Port Harcourt.
- ii. To examine the relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMES) In Port Harcourt.
- iii. To determine the relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMES) In Port Harcourt.
- iv. To determine the relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMES) In Port Harcourt.



LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study reviewed related literature that showed the relationship between sales agility and business performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMES), Port Harcourt in dimension of alertness, accessibility, swiftness and flexibility. While performance literature focuses on market share, competitive advantages, customer patronage and sales growth. However, the study anchored on the Theory of Constraints (TOC) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT). Constraints (TOC) was developed by Eliyahu Goldratt in 1984. The premise of TOC states that every process has a single constraint, and the total process throughout can only be improved when the constraint will further the goal and achieve more in business. In other word, the constraints theory is a method of identifying a limiting factor (constraint) and systematically improves on that limitation until it is no longer a limitation. This is a scientific approach to instill improvement.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) was proposed by Teece, Pisano and Shuen in 1997. The DCT is premised on three fundamental presumptions. First, is the capacity to sense and shape opportunities. Second, is to seize opportunities while the third is to maintain competitiveness through reconfiguring internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. The DCT explains the interplay that connects a firm's resources and product markets to competitive advantage and organizational survival.

The presumptions connect the nexus the DCT, and this study can be fully observed. Organizations adopting Dynamic Capabilities Theory must know how to adapt rapidly to changing situations in a business environment. It helps to show organizations achieving sustainable competitive advantage and survive for many years in a business environment that is dynamic and turbulent. Therefore, an organization that sense changes and opportunities as fast as possible and seizes such opportunities to maintain competitive advantage can be said to be strategically agile organization and not to be doubted

Concept of Sales Agility

Sales Agility refers to an organization's ability to optimize the workflow of their sales force. An agile sale force is comprised of sales reps who can wear many hats. They conduct operations and negotiations with clients at all levels of the sales cycle (Akhigbe and Onuoha, 2019).

Ekweli and Hamilton (2019), postulated that agile sales reps are extremely knowledgeable regarding all aspects of their products and services. Having a knowledge and understanding of a firm's product will allow it to consult its prospects in a professional and superior manner.

Tabek-Khoshnood and Nematizadeh (2017), asserted the following as crucial attributes of sales agility:

Active Learning: Every customer's perception of what agile looks like can be different. Finding out what this means in each case is essential if the salesperson is to respond effectively. It is not something that can be asked. And it is not something most customers would think about in depth either, so may find hard to explain. The salesperson must work it out. The first essential skill in sales agility is therefore listening. That means really digesting the words the customer used and how they choose to communicate their thoughts.



Flexible Verbal Behaviour: As well as deeply understanding how the customer is using language, skilled salespeople are equally careful when choosing the words they use. It is often unconscious. Many effective salespeople cannot tell you what it is that makes them successful, or they ascribe their success to something that, on closer inspection, isn't actually what they do. It is what we call the perception gap or unconscious competence and it's the reason why Huthwaite's models are based on observational research and not just the consultative approach taken by many of our contemporaries. Research showed that perception gaps are much narrower for skilled salespeople as they are fully aware of the language they use. The good news is you can train people to become more aware of their language and narrow the gap themselves. Even better, as people become more self-aware, they can make choices and adapt to their verbal behaviour and it is the key to success in every verbal business interaction.

Questioning Skills: Salespeople cannot be agile in meeting their customers' precise needs, priorities, concerns and desired outcomes without an in-depth and complete understanding of what they are. Gaining that understanding needs rigour. When it comes to questioning, a seller must develop a systematic, consistent, structured approach.

Knowledge: Before a salesperson professional start asking more questions it's crucial to know what questions to ask. No matter how well developed their listening and questioning skills are, if they bombard the customer with questions that are irrelevant nothing will move forward. Knowing the right background information on the customer will help. Information such as the problems the customer may be experiencing that your product can solve, and particularly where you know you can solve it better than the competition, is useful. As any industry developments or general trends that may be driving the purchase decision.

Confidence: One of the most powerful tools in the salesperson's repertoire is their confidence. There is little that impresses potential customers more than the calm, assured demeanour of a genuinely confident salesperson. A confident seller develops trust, provides reassurance and enhances their company's reputation as well as the customer's experience. Confidence enables the salesperson to explore the customer's needs and offer ideas in the most persuasive manner possible. Confidence cannot be learned, it must be gained, and there is no better way of gaining it than by being fluent in a sales methodology that works. Investing in high quality sales training can be a wise move for any organization.

Concept of Alertness

The first dimension of sales agility is alertness, defined as the ability to quickly detect changes, opportunities, and threats. The same principle applies to a business setting. Before a business can respond to changes in its environment, it must first identify those changes. Truly agile companies have developed a high level of alertness (Lee *et al.*, 2016). The alertness dimension requires sensing emerging market trends, listening to customers, interchanging information with suppliers, monitoring demand, and sensing impending disruptions, be they natural or man-made disasters (Lee *et al.*, 2016).

Toli and Tengeh (2017), opined that alertness referred to the process of paying attention to and being sensitive to the information about the objectives, events and behavioural patterns in environment and paying special attention to the problems of producers and consumers, unsatisfied needs and new combinations of available resources. They further stressed that the ability to identify entrepreneurial opportunities is generally considered to be a core attribute of entrepreneurship.



Concept of Accessibility

Working closely with alertness, accessibility is one of the dimensions of sales agility. Accessibility is the ability to quickly access relevant data. Once a company has used its alertness capability to detect change, it must be able to speedily access relevant data in order to quickly decide how to act. Information access across the supply chain is a key requirement for supply chain agility. At minimum, supply chain members need to share real-time demand, inventory, and production information. This is a challenge to achieve, since it encompasses data from dozens of sources, companies, regions, and time frames (Akhigbe and Onuoha, 2019).

Sosiawani *et al.* (2015), aver that agile companies have invested significant resources in improving data accessibility within their supply chains.

Concept of Swiftness

Sale agility is dependent on a company's swiftness, or the ability to implement decisions quickly (Singh, 2014). Sosiawani *et al.* (2015), argued that swiftness in organizations is pervasive today, as organizations struggle to adapt or face decline in the volatile environments of a global economic and political world. Many potent forces in these environments include competitive, technological innovations, professionalism, and demographics which each shape the process of organizational adaptation. As a result, organizations may shift focus, modify goals, restructure roles and responsibilities, and develop new forms. (Sosiawani *et al.*, 2015).

Tabe-Khoshnood and Nematizadeh (2017), argued that when the environments change, the organization must eventually respond, and today this must occur at a rate and in ways never seen or imagined. Organizations that are not able to adapt quickly enough to maintain their legitimacy or the resources they need to survive either cease to exist or become assimilated into other organizations.

Concept of Flexibility

Shalender and Singh (2014), flexibility can be described as a company's ability to modify its range of tactics and operations to the extent needed to implement its strategy. Flexibility is the ability of the company to respond quickly to changing competitive conditions and thereby develop and/or maintain competitive advantage. Shalender and Singh (2014), viewed it as the ability of the organization to adapt to substantial, uncertain, and fast occurring environmental changes that have a meaningful impact on the organization's performance.

Singh (2014) argued all the uncertainties present in the environment pose tremendous challenge for the marketers. Traditional business approaches, with very basic underpinnings of a somewhat stable environment, are no longer valid in today's turbulent and ever-changing business scenario.

In the backdrop of all this uncertainty and turbulence, flexibility has taken a center stage and its ability to provide the competitive edge to the organizations has been widely recognized both by the academicians and practitioners had.



Concept of Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises SMEs

Sustainability of overall firm performance and growth (Gupta, 2012) is largely dependent on efficient productivity and increased profitability, which has always been the common goals of firms (Roper, *et al.* 2015), through optimal operational and sales performance (Steger, 2019). These are made possible by firm's product quality (Davicik and Sharma, 2015), adopting innovative strategies for product sales and marketing, channeled towards influencing consumers' buying behaviour (Okeowo, *et al.* 2021).

Most SMEs in Nigeria are proving to produce competitive advantage through differentiation while some are producing it through cost. At the outset, the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) did not yield proper attention to the foundation of competitive advantage, but things have changed for good. Today, they are performing their best. Some of the Nigeria SMEs succeed, and some fail because there is a set of problems, such as the financial factor, strategic management factor, management experience factor, marketing factor, applied science and innovation factor, and many other (Roper, *et al.* 2015). Roper, *et al.* (2015), stressed that the financial factors are related to resources that can enhance the performance and growth of SMEs.

Concept of Market Share

Market share represents the percentage of an industry's total sales earned by a particular company over a specified period. A company's market share is its portion of total sales in relation to the market or industry in which it operates (Varadarajan, 2015).

Pearce and Robinson (2013) viewed market share as sales relative to those of other competitors in the market. Market shares are usually used to express competitive position. It is generally accepted that increased market share can be equated with success, whereas decreased market share is a manifestation of unfavourable actions by firm and usually equated with failure. However, high market share has been associated with high profits.

Concept of Competitive Advantage

Arokodare and Asikhia (2020) defined competitive advantage (CA) as the edge that an organization had over the other. What makes an organization better in production of goods/services than their rivals? Arokodare and Asikhia (2020) aver that competitive advantage is simply the ability of an organization to stay ahead of present or potential competition. Competitive advantage could be seen as a edge or a favourable business position, superior to it competitors in the marketplace or industry by being more distinctive in meeting and surpassing customers' needs compared to its competitors (Collis, 2016).

Having a competitive advantage over other organizations puts an organization at a vantage position to outperform other firms and remain relevant at all times. In other words, it makes an organization immune to changes as the organizations always come out top. Idris and Al-Rubaie (2015) posit that competitive advantage or having an edge over others in competition had a way of driving business growth and overall performance prospects. It is regarded as part of the foundation for high level performance. Competitive advantage as a dimension of performance becomes a vital factor for success and sustainability in the business environment, as well as in the pursuit of excellence and work processes development (Idris and Al-Rubaie, 2015).



Concept of Customer Patronage

Customer patronage is the approval or support provided by customers with respect to a particular brand. Patronage delivers the foundation for an established and growing market share (MacInnis *et al.*, 2014).

Kotler (2017) advocated that consumer had unpredictable degrees of patronage to particular services, stores and other entities. He stressed that consumers can be categorized into four groups which consist of hard-core patrons who are consumers of one product always; split patrons usually become loyal to either two or three products within a specified period of time; shifting patrons from one product to another and finally switchers are consumers who are not loyal to any brand at all.

Farris *et al.* (2010) added that brand awareness relates to the percentage of consumer segment or the total population that is conscious of a particular brand. Consequently, customer patronage and behaviour are greatly affected by service quality and the level of satisfaction gained from patronizing a particular brand. Customer service is seen to be a great factor which entices and preserves customers. Customer loyalty comes about when there is quality and effective customer service.

Empirical Review

Emejulu *et al.* (2020), examined strategic agility and performance of small and medium enterprises in the phase of Covid-19 pandemic in Owerri, Imo State. The findings from the study showed that the strategic agility of SMEs had impact on their performance as captured by competitive advantage.

Govuzela and Mafini (2019) investigated the connection between organizational agility, business best practices and the performance of SMEs in South Africa. The study concluded that the performance of SMEs in South Africa. The study concluded that the performance of SMEs can be improved tremendously through a proper alignment between the four best business practices considered in the study.

Ekweli and Hamilton (2020) examined the relationship between product innovation and organizational agility in the banking sector in Nigeria economy. It was revealed that there is a significant relationship between product innovation and organizational agility in the banking sector in Nigeria economy. Therefore, product innovation in the banking sector in Nigeria led to high sensing agility, decision agility and acting agility.

Bassam (2019) showed the importance of strategic agility in achieving competitive advantage through studying its impact on innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, and cost leadership. The study concluded that the application of strategic agility is one of the significant tools to achieve competitive advantage within a volatile and rapid changing business environment.

Akhigbe and Onuoha (2019), investigate the nexus between strategic agility and organizational resilience of food and beverages firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study, therefore, concluded that when an organization's strategic agility increases, the firm's resilience also increases as a result of their linear relationship.



In addition, Olanipekun *et al.* (2015), carried out a research study on the impact of strategic management on competitive advantage strategic agility: Achieving superior organizational performance through strategic foresight and organizational performance. The study concluded that strategic management had significant impact on competitive advantage and strategic agility of Nigeria Bottling Company.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. Structure questionnaire was used for data collection. The sample size for the study was 60 respondents that was selected from three (3) companies which include, ever living Products, Mini Penny Enterprises Nigeria Company and Global-Ainsworth Engineering Nig. Ltd. The unit of analysis are Production Manager, Internal/Quality Control Managers, Sale Managers and Salesmen.

However, the judgmental sampling method was adopted and was analyzed with Pearson Product Moment Correlation (i.e. PPMC) in the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS/FINDING

Testing of Hypotheses

Statement of Hypotheses 1:

HO₁: There is no significant relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.1: Corrections between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

		AI	PSMEs
AI	Pearson Correction	1	.847**
	Sig (2 tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
PSMEs	Pearson Correction	.847**	1
	Sig (2 tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2021.

The result showed the relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. The correlation coefficient of 0.847** and an alpha or p-value of less than 0.05 ($p=0.000$) indicates that there is a significant relation alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt was rejected.



While the alternate hypothesis states that there is significant relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt was upheld.

Statement of Hypotheses 2:

HO₂: There is no significant relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.2: Corrections between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

		Ac	PSMEs
Ac	Pearson Correction	1	.891**
	Sig (2 tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
PSMEs	Pearson Correction	.891**	1
	Sig (2 tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2021.

The result revealed the significant relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. With the correlation coefficient of 0.891** and an alpha or p-value of less than 0.05 ($p=0.000$) there is a significant relation between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected that there is no significant relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, whereas the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. was accepted.

Statement of Hypotheses 3:

HO₃: There is no significant relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.3: Corrections between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

		Sw	PSMEs
Sw	Pearson Correction	1	.857**
	Sig (2 tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
PSMEs	Pearson Correction	.857**	1
	Sig (2 tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2021.



The result showed the relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt with correlation coefficient of 0.857** and an alpha or p-value less than 0.05 ($p=0.000$) indicating that there is a significant relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected, there is no significant relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. While the alternate hypothesis which states there is a significant relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt was accepted.

Statement of Hypotheses 4:

HO₃: There is no significant relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

Table 4.4: Corrections between flexibility and marketing performance of telecommunication firms in Port Harcourt.

		Fl	PSMEs
Fl	Pearson Correction	1	.890**
	Sig (2 tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
PSMEs	Pearson Correction	.890**	1
	Sig (2 tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

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

Source: SPSS Output, 2021.

The result showed the relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, with correlation coefficient of 0.890** and an alpha or p-value of less than 0.05 ($p=0.000$) indicating that there is a significant relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected that there is a significant relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt, while the alternate hypothesis states there is a significant relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt was accepted.

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis (H₀₁) sought to determine that there is no significant relationship between alertness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

The result revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between alertness and performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Thus, leading to the rejection of hypothesis (H₀₁). This explained that firm's/organization's alertness results into increased performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

The second hypothesis (H₀₂) sought to determine that there is no significant relationship between accessibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port



Harcourt. The result revealed there is a statistically significant relationship between accessibility and performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Thus, leading to the rejection of hypothesis (H0₁). This explained that firm's/organization's accessibility results into increased performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

The third hypothesis (H0₃) sought to determine that there is no significant relationship between swiftness and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. The result revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between swiftness and performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Thus, leading to the rejection of hypothesis (H0₁). This explained that firm's/organization's swiftness results into increased performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

The fourth hypothesis (H0₄) sought to determine that there is no significant relationship between flexibility and performance of small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. The result revealed there is a statistically significant relationship between flexibility and performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt. Thus, leading to the rejection of hypothesis (H0₁). This explained that firm's/organization's flexibility results into increased performance of Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in Port Harcourt.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The implication to research and practice from this study is that the findings and recommendations and conclusions will help operators of small and medium scale enterprises to identify the factors that influence customer's satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings revealed, the study concluded that there is a significant relationship between alertness, accessibility, swiftness and flexibility and performance of small and medium scales enterprises in Port Harcourt.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It was suggested that similar research studies should be undertaken in other industries using the same study variables such as alertness, accessibility, swiftness and flexibility.



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