Ensuring Seamless Improvement in Marketing Performance through Sales Force Competence Management

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Abstract

This study focused on determining the nexus between sales force competence management and Marketing performance. Using questionnaire, primary data were collected from 135 senior Marketing executives from 35 industrial and domestic products firms registered with Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) in Port Harcourt. We adopted Pearson's r and Stepwise regression procedure with its constituent ANOVA and t-test in our quantitative analysis. Three hypothesized sales force competence management activities – Sales force competence analysis, sales force competence development, and sales force competence evaluation were found to affect marketing performance. We therefore, recommend that for a continuous leap in marketing performance, the industrial and domestic products firms operating in Port Harcourt should pay adequate attention to the tasks that are involved in these sales force competence management elements.

Key words: Competent sales force, marketing performance, sales force, sales force competence, sales force competence management.

1. Introduction

Nigeria has a millennium development project of becoming one of the best twenty economies in the world by the year 2020. To achieve this objective, Nigeria needs to embark on policies and measures that have high potential in beefing up her streams of income, if possible, in geometric proportions. Macroeconomics stress that the wealth of a nation is dependent on the level of her economic activities (Encyclopedia of Business, 2001). That is to say, that aggregate business performance of a country's economic units shapes her economy. Marketing performance is most often synonymous with business performance (Futrell, 1991). Marketing performance determines to a large extent whether a firm is doing well or otherwise relative to its competitors.

However, most often, Nigeria organizations do not achieve the level of sales performance that would yield rents for them. Sometimes these organizations experience sub-optional or even poor marketing performance. As a result, organizations are worried about the abysmal contribution of sales force to marketing performance, notwithstanding the large chunk of budget that is used to maintain it. With the notion that sales force performance positively correlates with marketing performance, organizations view sales force ineffectiveness and incompetence with grave seriousness and concern.

For example, in associating corporate performance with sales force management, Mallin and Mayo (2006) observe that "Accounting for sales loss is important to managing the sales force as well as helping to ensure corporate profitability." This perhaps, may have led to the call for adequate management of human competence at work (de Geus, 1999; Zeb-Obipi, 2007), such as sales force competence. It makes sense to argue that incompetence of the sales force will affect the organization's marketing performance in particular and the nation's economy by extension.

This study, thus, views with deep interest, the effect of sales force competence management on marketing performance. A long-standing marketing principle is that understanding and satisfying customer lead to superior business results (Zhu and Nakata, 2007). Effective selling and sales management are often critical to marketing success (Avlonitis and Panagopulos, 2006). But performance depends on competence. A worker competence depends more on how his or her competence are managed (Defloor, et al. 2006; Zeb-Obipi, 2007). This is because management of competence enhances the knowledge, skills and behavior of the individuals for better performance at work (Asiegbu, 2009).

Clearly, among the factors critical to business profitability, sales force competence management is by far most sparsely researched. No empirical study on sales force competence management and its effects on marketing performance are found in the literature. This informs our research interest in this regard, recognizing the unique nature of sales job that distinguishes salespeople from other organizational workers and the critical role of sales force in customer care, market orientation, value delivery, and customer relationship management.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Hypotheses
2.1 Sales Force Competence Management and Marketing Performance
The resource-based theory of competitive advantage focuses on the role internal resources like employees play in developing and maintaining a firm's competitive capabilities (Barney, 1991; Wright & McMahan, 1992 ; Wright et al , 1994). In particular, Pfeffer (1994) argues that firms wishing to succeed in today's global business environment must make appropriate Human Resource investment to acquire and build employees who possess better skills and capabilities than their competitors.

Firms focus on competence management through acquiring, developing and utilizing employees with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities (Wright & Snell, 1991; Wright et al 1995). Specifically organizations are found to experience higher performance when they recruit and acquire employees possessing competences consistent with the organization's current strategies (Wright et al, 1995). In addition, some reviews have shown that competence and performance are closely related (While, 1994; Ramritu and Bernard, 2004).

In this study we define a company's sales force as a team consisting of its stock of salespeople, involved in creating demand, establishing and sustaining long-term exchange relationships between their organizations and their valued customers. Competence of a worker is described in terms of his or her knowledge, skills, and behavior Schoonover, et al, 2000; McCain et al, 2004; Avilar, 2005; Defloor et al, 2006; Ley et al 2007, Zeb-obipi, 2007). This paper views **sales force competence as those observable knowledge, skills, and behavior, which differentiate between superior and other performers in the context of sales job (Asiegbu, 2009).**

Competence management has been defined by a number of scholars including Lindgren et al (2004), Sinnott et al (2000), Berio and Harzallah (2005), Developing Zone Document – HR (2008), Ley et al (2007), Zeb-obipi (2007), Avilar (2005). In this study we define **sales force competence management as the process of analyzing, developing, and evaluating the knowledge, skills and behavior of an organizations sales force members for superior performance in sales job.** Thus, we view sales force competence management to involve three interdependent and interrelated stages, namely sales force competence analysis (SFCA), sales force competence development (SFCD) and sales force competence evaluation (SFCE). Performance is behavior evaluated in terms of its contributions to the goals and objectives of the organization (Johnston and Marshall, 2003; Dalrymple et al 2004; Churchill and Peter, 1998; **Marketing performance is a measure of the contributions of an organization's marketing functions to its corporate goals and objectives** (Jackson et al, 1995). In line with previous studies especially those of O'Sullivan and Abela (2007) and Kohli and Jaworski (1994), we measured marketing performance in terms of respondents' rating for his or her firm's market share (MS), sales volume (SV) and profitability (P) performance relative to those of their previous years and competitors'.

2.1.1 Sales Force Competence Analysis (SFCA) and Marketing Performance.
Sales force competence analysis (SFCA) is a sales force competence management function that involves determining the types, dimensions, and levels of competences required of a sales force in a specific sales job context (Asiegbu, 2009). Thus sales force competence analysis comprises distinct activities such as: (a) identification of job competences and their levels which a sales person needs to have at a particular point in time giving the competitive business environmental challenges; (b) assessment of the actual competences which the sales people have already acquired; and (c) determination of competence gaps, - the difference between the current competence requirements and already acquired competence.

Required competence identification involves but not limited to specifying the requirements in terms of competences to be fulfilled by sales person. Sales people need to have many competence dimensions, at some desired levels for effective performance in a particular sales job context. The levels of knowledge, skills, and behavior, motives, temperaments, responsiveness empathy required of a sales person and deemed to be appropriate for optimal performance in sales job are identifies (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990, Probst, et al, 2000). This involves determining which sales competences have been acquired and at what levels, (Decoi et al, 2007). Each sales person competence is composed of a set of competence profile elements, which represents among other things, statements of acquired competences.

Competence gap identification is a process of determining the training needs of individual, sales person in relations to the important components of tasks identified for training (Wentling, 1992). Competence gap analysis determines how skilled or proficient individual sales people are on these components, how much individuals differ from desired performance; and whether or not they need training. Thus, a competence gap is a measure of the required performance minus the present performance. It shows the extent a sales person's already acquired competence falls below the critical level.

It is, thus, clear that clearly identifying the competence gap gives the entire competence management its focus. Competence gap identification can thus, enable management avoid waste and achieve cost minimization, which in turn impacts positively on the profit margin of the firm. This gives rise to our first hypothesis.

H$_{A1}$: Sales force competence analysis is associated with marketing performance.

2.1.2 Sales Force Competence Development (SFCD) and Marketing Performance
The business environment is unstable, complex, and uncertain, providing opportunities and threats from time to time. This requires that sales people competence be developed in response to these environmental challenges. Sales force competence development is the activity of broadening the dimensions and levels of individual sales people competences, which will help achieve the sales and marketing objectives and meet its needs (Johansson and Hurria, 2003). It involves building the knowledge and skills of sales force members so that they will be prepared to take on new responsibilities and challenges as they unfold in the business environment. This entails making sales people acquire new horizons, technologies or view points with the goals of being able to do more with less and increase creative problem- solving abilities. Sales force competence development is measured indirectly by evaluating the tasks that comprise it, namely training, coaching ad mentoring (Development Zone Document – HR, 2008).

Training is the process of acquiring specific skills to perform a job better Asiegbu, (2009). Van Dorsal (1962) defines training as the process of teaching, informing, or educating people so that they may become as well qualified as possible to do their job, and they become qualified to perform in positions of greater difficulty and responsibility. In this study, we define training as the effort put forward to provide job-related culture, skills, knowledge and attitudes that result in superior performance in the selling environment.

We believe that training helps people to become qualifies and proficient in doing some jobs (Dahama, 1979). Also training is seem to be concerned with those activities, which are designed to improve human performance on the job that sales people are at present doing or being hired to do (Flippo, 1961). Training focuses on using appropriate techniques, to transfer knowledge and skills, which are intended to change a salesperson's current behavior to desired sales job behavior. Usually, an organization facilitates the employees' learning through training so that their modified behavior contributes to the attainment of the organization's goals and objectives.

Coaching relates to promotion and advancement issues not specifically tied to the sales role (Pullins and Fine, 2002). Coaching is about increasing an individual's knowledge and thought processes with a particular task or process (Asiegbu, 2009). It creates a supportive environment that develops critical thinking skills, ideas, and behaviors about a subject. Although, it is closely tied to training, it is more personal and intimate in nature. Coaching is done in real time. That is, it performed on the job. The coach uses real tasks and problems to help the learner increase his or her performance. Coaching relies on facilities and developmental skills. Some coaching techniques include: drawing people out, interpreting comments, clarifying thoughts or comments, sensing group energy, handling objections (Pullins and Fine, 2002). These can be used to enable sales people develop or improve their competences in sales job.

Mentoring is career developing in nature. Mentoring is often thought of as the transfer of wisdom from a wise and trusted teacher, and thus, it relies on the mentor's specific knowledge and wisdom. According to Fine and Pullins (1998), mentoring represents the support, guidance and counseling that an experienced person (mentor) provides to a less experienced person (Protégé). Higgins (2001) argues that factors in the new millennium workplace force employees to seek mentoring from non-traditional sources such as peers. Lack of job security, shifting emphasis away from seniority and towards flexibility and the variety of structural arrangements within and among organizations often make managers unavailable as mentors. Peer mentoring occurs when a more experienced salesperson (the mentor) takes responsibility for development and guidance of a less experienced person (the Protégé) (Pullins and Fine, 2002). A mentor is thus, a more experienced agent who provides help and support to a less experienced agent (peer or colleague); while a protégé is a less experienced agent who receives help and support from a more experienced agent (peer or colleague).

Mentors can engage in two general types of activities with protégé: psychosocial support and vocational or task training (Kram, 1993; Noe and Thomas, 1989; Olian et al, 1988). Pullins and Fine (2002) recommended four mentoring behaviors. These are: developing selling skills, counseling, providing exposure, and role modeling. Developing selling skills describes mentoring related specifically to sales aspects of the job (e.g., sales planning, handling objections, closing sales). Counseling assesses the degree to which the relationship provides socio-emotional support. Providing exposure involves helping the protégé meet customers and become more visible with selling tasks. Role modeling is where the protégé learns by imitating or identifying with the mentor. Given the above, it is thus, possible that a firm can minimize or close the competence gaps of the sales people, raise their productive levels and make them more effective in their sales job. This in turn will have a positive impact on marketing performance. We are therefore, inclined to believe that training, coaching and monitoring can be used to enhance the skills, knowledge and behavior of sales people for better performance. Thus, we generate our second hypothesis.

H_{A2}: Sales force competence development is associated with marketing performance.

2.1.3 Sales Force Competence Evaluation (SFCE) and Marketing Performance
Competence evaluation is a process to determine the relevance, effectiveness, and impacts of development methods and programs in light of their objectives. Raab et al (1987) define training evaluation as a systematic process of collecting information for and about a training activity, which can then be used for guiding decision-making and for assessing the relevance and effectiveness of various training components.

Sales force competence evaluation is an assessment of the efficacy or otherwise of the competence development methods and materials. Once a company implements a sales force competence development program, it must evaluate the programs success. To evaluate sales force competence development programs effectively, sales managers gauge sales people reactions to the program. This feedback from trainees provides companies with crucial information on how sales people perceive their programs. Also sales managers attempt to determine the results of their development program by studying the quantifiable data (e.g., output) and job performance of sales people who recently completed a competence development program (Encyclopedia of Business, 2001).

Kirkpatrick (1976) suggest four criteria to evaluate development programs: (i) reaction, (ii) learning, (iii)behavior, and (iv) results. Reaction measures are how the trainees liked the program in terms of content, methods, duration, trainers, facilities, and management. Learning measures the trainees' knowledge and skills, which they were able to absorb at the time of training. Behavior is concerned with the extent to which the trainees were able to apply their knowledge to real field situations. Results are concerned with the tangible impact of the training program on the trainees, their job contexts, or the firms. Halim and Ali (2000) suggest two classes of evaluation: (i) formative evaluation and (ii) summative evaluation. Formative evaluation measures how appropriate the training was in changing behavior of participants. Formative development evaluation involves the collection of relevant and useful data while the training program is being conducted. Summative evaluation is done at the end of the program and makes an overall assessment of its effectiveness in relation to achieving the objectives and goals. Halim and Ali (2000) argue that both formative evaluation and summative evaluation ensure performance. We therefore, think that reaction, learning, and behavioral measures, as well as formative and summative evaluations are important elements of evaluation programs that can help ascertain the efficacy of sales force development programs. Evaluation thus, helps the firm function more effectively as feedback from evaluation is used to control the entire program and minimize waste and cost. We are inclined to believe that this will impact positively on marketing performance. Thus, we have our third hypothesis.

H$_{A3}$: Sales competence evaluation is associated with marketing performance

3. Methodology
3.1 Data Collection and Measurement
Using questionnaire, data were collected from a total sample of 135 subjects, made up of marketing executives, marketing managers, and senior sales managers, from 36 firms registered with Port Harcourt Branch of manufacturers' Association of Nigeria (MAN) as at February, 2012 when the survey commenced. The data were captured on a five-point likert-type scale measurements anchored on 1 = "very low extent" though 5 = "very great extent" for sales force competence management; and 1 = "much lower" through 5 = "much higher" for marketing performance. This is consistent with the scale used in similar studies conducted by O'Sullivan and Abela (2007), Kohli et al (1998), Fornel et al (1992); Reichheld and Sasser (1990), Deshpande et al (1993), Deshphande and Farley (1998).

The questionnaire was pretested for comprehension, relevance, completeness and extension of validity with a pilot of ten senior sales managers from the industrial and domestic product firms as well as three scholars in the field of sales management. The feedback from them formed bases for improving upon the final draft. Four copies of the questionnaire were hand-delivered to each of the 36 participating firms, bringing the total distribution to 144. However, our data analyses were based on 135 copies of usable copies of the questionnaire, representing 93.75% responsive rate.

3.2 Validity and Reliability of Instruments
The validity of the variables measured was already confirmed in previous studies relating to competence management activities Asiegbu, 2009; Hiermann and Hofferer, 2005; Zeb-Obipi, 2007) and marketing performance measures (Kohli and Jaworski, 1994; O'Sullivan and Abela, 2007; Srivastava and Reibstein, 2005; Miller and Cioffi, 2004; Wang et al 2004; vision Edge, 2006). However, we reconfirmed the applicability of the measures in the present study, hence the pilot study.

Cronbach's Alpha was applied to measure the reliability of the concepts of the study variables. Coefficient Alpha is one of the most widely used measures of internal consistency reliability in social sciences (Hatcher, 1994). The Cronbach's coefficients of the items in the instrument as shown in table 1 are above the rule of thumb cut-off mark of 0.70 (Hatcher, 1994), thus indicating that the items are internally related to the factors they are expected to measure.

Table 1: Reliability Coefficients of Variable Measures

S/No	Dimensions/Measures of the study variables	Number of items	Number of Cases	Cronbach' Alpha
1	Sales force Competence Analysis	4	135	0.759
2	Sales force Competence Development	5	135	0.808
3	Sales force Competence Evaluation	6	135	0.806
4	Market Share	7	135	0.814
5	Sales Volume	6	135	0.810
6	Profitability	7	135	0.821

Source: SPSS Output on Research Data – February–May 2012.

4. Analysis and Findings

This paper used descriptive and inferential statistics to ascertain the correlation between the various sales force competence management activities sales force competence analysis, sales force competence development, and sales force competence evaluation and marketing performance indicators (sales volume, market share, and profitability). The hypotheses were analyzed with Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple Regression approach. First, we carried out a test of correlation between the marketing performance, sales force competence management variables.

Table 2: Correlation between Marketing Performance Measures and Sales Force Competence Management Elements

Variable	Statistic	Market Share (MS)	Sales Volume (SV)	Profitability (P)
Sales force competence analysis (SFCA)	Pearson correlation sig. (2-tailed) N	.819** .000 .135	.986** .000 .135	.786** .000 135
Sales force competence development (SFCD)	Pearson correlation sig. (2-tailed) N	.830** .000 .135	.817** .000 .135	.845** .000 .135
Sales force competence evaluation (SFCE)	Pearson correlation sig. (2-tailed) N	.828** .000 .135	.810** .000 .135	.834** .000 .135

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: SPSS Output on Research Data, February-May, 2012.

Table 2 is the result of the correlation test indicating that the correlation coefficients are statistically significant. Based on Cohen and Halliday (1982) classification of Pearson's r value, all the r values in our study fall between 0.70 and 0.89, indicating a strong correlation between the various marketing performance measures (sales growth, sales volume, and profitability) and the sales force competence management activities (SFCA, SFCD, and SFCE). Also all their p-values were 0.000<0.01 indicating that there is one chance in 100 that we could have selected a sample that shows, a relationship when none exists in the population. In other words, our model is showing that it has a very high predictive value.

In this study the values of tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) as reported in our SPSS outputs are not tending towards zero (Neter et al, 1990), (Table 5), indicating clearly that we do not have any threat of multi-collinearity among the sales force competence management variables (SFCA, SFCD and SFCE) in our model. Stepwise regression method was used in entering data concerning the predictor variable into the SPSS program that ran the test for multiple regression.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Sales Force Competence Management Activities and Marketing Performance Relationship: Model Summary.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	St. Error Estimate	Change Statistic					Durbin Watson
					R^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F change	
	.860[a]	.739	.737	9.282	.739	376.559	1	133	.000	
	.883[b]	.779	.776	8.565	.040	24.194	1	132	.000	
	.888[c]	.789	.784	8.410	.009	5.894	1	131	.017	1.320

a   Predictors (constant), Sales Force Competence Development (SFCD)
b   Predictors (constant), Sales Force Competence Development (SFCD), Sales Force Competence Evaluation (SFCE).
c   Predictors (constant), Sales Force Competence Development (SFCD), Sales Force Competence Evaluation (SFCE), Sales Force Competence Analysis (SFCA).
d   Dependent Variable: Marketing Performance (MP)
Source: SPSS output on Research Data, February-April 2012

Table 3 shows that the model has an R value of 0.888, indicating that sales force competence management correlates highly with marketing performance. R square represents the proportion of the variance in the criterion variable that is explained by the regression model. Our model has an R^2 of 0.789, and the adjusted R^2 is 0.784, indicating that the model can very well account for 78.4 percent of the variations in marketing performance, and a p-value of 0.00 (Table 3) shows that the model has a very high predictive value. This is also indicated in (Table 4) by a high regression sum of squares of 34631.399 out of 43897.437. It is also supported by the low significant value of the F-statistic, 0.017, which is lower than 0.05 (Table 3).

Table 4 Regression Analysis of Sales Force Competence Management Activities and Marketing Performance Relationship: ANOVA

	Sum of squares	Df	Means square	F	Sig.
Regression	34631.399	3	11543.800	163.202	0.000
Residual	9266.038	131			
Total	43897.437	134			

Predictors: Sales force competence development, sales force competence evaluation, sales force competence analysis
Criterion Variable: Marketing performance.
Source: SPSS output on Research Data, February,-May, 2012

The multiple regression equation takes the form $MP = \beta_0 + \beta_{CA}SFCA + \beta_{CD}SFCD + \beta_{CE}SFCE$. The β_{CA}, β_{CD}, and β_{CE} are the regression coefficients, representing the amount the marketing performance (MP) changes when the corresponding sales force competence management variables change by 1 unit. The β_0 is the constant, where the regression line intercepts the y axis, representing the output amount the marketing performance will be when all the sales force competence variables (SFCA, SFCD, and SFCE) are 0. We therefore, tested the null hypothesis that at least one of β_{CA}, β_{CD}, and β_{CE} = 0.

As shown in Table 5, β_0 = 4.795; interception /t/= 1.59, with a p-value of 0.014, which is greater than zero.
SFCA/t/ = 2.43, with p-value = 0.017, which is less than $t_{0.025}$ (Table 5). Also β_{CA} = 1.120, which is greater than zero. (See regression equation). Thus, we accept H_{A1}. These indicate a significant positive association between sales force competence analysis and marketing performance.

SFCD/t/ = 4.12, with p-value = 0.000, which is less than $t_{0.025}$ (Table 5). Also β_{CD} = 1.545, which is greater than zero. (See regression equation). Thus, we accept H_{A2}. These indicate a significant positive association between sales force competence development and marketing performance.

SFCE/t/ = 3.61, with p-value = 0.000, which is less than $t_{0.025}$ (Table 5). Also β_{CE} = 1.262, which is greater than zero. (See regression equation). Thus, we accept H_{A3}. These indicate a significant positive association between sales force competence evaluation and marketing performance.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of sales force competence management and marketing performance Relationships: Coefficients

	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient			95% confidence interval for B		Correlations			Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower bound	Upper bound	Zero order	Partial correlation	Part	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	4.795	3.014		1.59	0.14	-1.167	10.757					
Sales force competence development	1.545	0.375	0.387	4.12	.000	.804	2.286	.860	.339	.166	.183	5.5
Sales force competence evaluation	1.262	0.350	.335	3.61	.000	.570	1.954	0.853	.301	.145	.178	5.3
Sales force competence analysis	1.120	0.461	.207	2,43	.017	.207	2.033	.825	.207	.097	.222	4.5

Criterion variables: Marketing performance (MP)
Source: SPSS OUTPUT ON Research Data February –May 2012.

Based on our test results, as they are empirically established, we have very strong evidence that the intercept β_0, (4.795), is significant and that SFCA, SFCD, and SFCE in the regression equation, significantly affect, and are related to marketing performance. The revised model will be thus:

MP = 4.795 + 1.545SFCD + 1.262SFCE + 1.120SFCA + Σ. …………… (Regression equation)
The coefficients of this MP model shows that sales force competence development (SFCD) is greatest in influencing marketing performance, followed by sales force competence evaluation (SFCE) and finally sales force competence analysis (SFCA).

Table 6: Results of Test of Sales Force Competence Management Marketing Performance Specific Hypotheses

Predictor	Statistics	Marketing Performance	
SFCA	Hypothesis t-value β_{CA} P-value Decision	H_{01} 2.43 1.120 0.017 Reject H_{01}	 Accept H_{A1}
SFCD	Hypothesis t-value β_{CD} P-value Decision	H_{02} 3.61 1.545 0.00 H_{02}	 Accept H_{A2}
SFCE	Hypothesis t-value β_{CE} P-value Decision	H_{03} 4.12 1.262 0.00 Reject H_{03}	 Accept H_{A3}

Source: SPSS output Results of Hypotheses Testing on Research Data February-May 2012.

5. Discussion of Findings

Our results reveal that sale force competence development positively and significantly affects marketing performance. This is evidenced in Tables 2, 3,4, 5 and 6. We can see in Table 5 that the sales force competence development adopted by the industrial and domestic products firms in Nigeria had a t-value of 4.12 with an associated p-value of 0.000. Since the sales force competence development adopted by these firms was highly significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance, the influence of sales force competence development adopted by the firms on their marketing performance was empirically proved. SFCD strongly affects MP through its elements – mentoring, skill training, and coaching. The individual activities that constitute sales force competence development adopted by these firms were subjected to further test to determine which of them correlated better with marketing performance. The SPSS output on the activities presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Correlation of Sales Force Competence Development Items and Marketing Performance

Sales Force Competence Development Items	Pearson R	P-Value	Mean	Std Deviation
Sales force skill training	0.723**	0.000	3.21	1.100
Coaching	0.722**	0.000	3.25	1.098
Mentoring	0.768**	0.000	3.21	1.129

Source: SPSS output on Research Data Collected February-May 2012.

The results show that skill training, mentoring, and coaching have the potential to improve sales force competence, which in turn, positively affects marketing performance. Specifically, mentoring correlates most highly with marketing performance. Pullins and Fine (2002) recommend four mentoring behaviors, namely – developing selling skills, counseling, providing exposure, and role modeling. A firm can use these behaviors to transform its sales force competence for greater performance in sales job. In support of the relationship between sales force competence management and performance, Hierman and Hofferer (2005) argue that effective and systematic competence management comprises among other activities competence identification, competence acquisition, and competence development. Furthermore our finding is in agreement with Zeb-Obipi (2007), study which found worker competence development as a very important activity in worker competence management for superior productivity performance. Also, Clark (2004) suggests that if the employee desires to perform, but lacks the requisite job knowledge or skill, then, additional training or development may be the answer. He argues that competence is related to effective performance and a person gains competence through education, training, experience of natural abilities. Gillis and Beauchemin (2000) maintain that competency-based training helps to conveys expert representatives' skills and knowledge to average sales people, thus boosting their overall performance. Training helps people to become qualified and proficient in doing some jobs (Dahama, 1979), and thus, become effective in contributing to business performance. Also in appreciating the influence of coaching, Pullin and Fine (2002) emphasize that coaching creates a supportive environment for that developing critical thinking, skills and behaviors about a subject. From this discussion, it is evident that the elements of sales force competence development – mentoring, skills training, and coaching can be used to substantially improve sales force competence, and thus, enable the sales force contribute optimally to marketing performance. We therefore, conclude that sales force competence development positively affect marketing performance.

The data analyses reveal that sales force competence evaluation has significant positive association with marketing performance. This is shown in Tables 5, 6, 8 and 9. We can see in Table 5, that the sales force competence evaluation adopted by the participating firms had a t-value of 3.61 with an associated p-value of 0.000. Since the sales force competence evaluation adopted by these firms was highly significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significant, the influence of sales force competence evaluation adopted by the firms on their marketing performance was empirically proved. Sales force competence evaluation strongly affects MP through its elements – formative evaluation, summative evaluation, reaction measures, learning measures, and behavioral measures. These individual activities that constitute sales force competence evaluation were subjected to further test to determine which of them correlates better with marketing performance. The SPSS outputs on the activities are presented in Table 8.

The Table 8 shows that behavioral measures rank highest in correlating with marketing performance. This is followed by summative evaluation, next is learning measures, followed by formative evaluation and finally reaction measures.

Table 8: Correlation of Sales Force Competence Evaluation Elements against Marketing Performance

Sales Force Competence Evaluation Items	Pearson R	P-Value	Mean	Std Deviation
Formative evaluation	0.667**	0.000	3.13	0.918
Summative evaluation	0.706**	0.000	3.11	0.920
Reaction measures	0.635**	0.000	3.15	1.029
Learning measures	0.685**	0.000	3.09	1.018
Behavioral measures	0.776**	0.000	3.21	0.988

Source: SPSS output on Research Data Collected February-May 2012.

In recognition of the relevance of competence evaluation, Johansson and Hurria (2003), argue that competence management activities entail competence analysis, competence planning, realization of plan, and evaluation. Sales force competence evaluation affects marketing performance through behavioral measures, summative evaluation, learning measures, formative evaluation, and reaction measures. In support of the importance of behavioral measures, Raab et al (1987) maintain that the competence development was in changing the behavior of participants in real-life situations. We, therefore, conclude that sales force competence evaluation can be used to achieve optimal or superior marketing performance.

Sales force competence analysis was found to have positive and significant relationship with marketing performance through identifying sales force required competences, Sales force already acquired competences, and sales force competence gap. The table 9 indicates that identifying required competences correlated most highly, followed by identifying already acquired competences and then determining competence gap. This is indicated in table 5, 6, 8 and 9. We can see in Table 8 that the sales force competence analysis of the firms had a t-value of 2.43 with an associated p-value of 0.017.

Table 9: Correlation of Sales Force Competence Analysis Elements against Marketing Performance

Sales Force Competence Analysis Items	Pearson R	P-Value	Mean	Std Deviation
Identifying required competences	0.760**	0.000	3.19	0.879
Identifying already acquired competence	0.683**	0.000	3.10	0.864
Determining competence gap	0.673**	0.000	3.07	1.066

Source: SPSS output on Research Data Collected February-May 2012.

Since the sales force competence analysis of these firms was significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significant, the influence of sales force competence on marketing performance was empirically established. SFCA significantly affects MP through its elements. The individual activities that constitute sale force competence analysis were subjected to further test to determine which of the, correlates most with marketing performance.

Avilar (2005) recognizes competence analysis as one of the competence management activities that affect performance. In agreement with the relationship between competence analysis and marketing performance, Malone (1984) opines that competence needs identification and curriculum development are important to organizations that are seeking to achieve improved performance. Competence analysis facilitates access to expertise in large companies (Eppler, 2001). Decoi et al (2007) maintain that identifying already acquired skills and knowledge enables a firm to determine which skills and knowledge have been acquired and at what level. This is to say that competence analysis enables marketing executives to ascertain the exact nature of the competence needs, and their dimensions and levels. Wentling (1992) argue that it would be a waste of resources and frustrating to the trainers and trainees to design and deliver training programs where the sales person are already able and proficient; and suggests that identifying competence gap will enable management to avoid waste and make cost-effective decisions, which will in turn, positively impact on the profit margin of the firm. From this discussion, it is apparent that sales force competence analysis makes sales force competence management more cost effective and result-oriented, and thus, capable of influencing sales force proficiency in selling without wasting the firm's resources. We therefore, conclude that sales force competence analysis positively affect marketing performance.

6. Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

Firms have to be strategic if they aim at achieving competitive advantage and earn economic rent. This study has provided a rent-yielding strategy by revealing the linkage between sales force competence management elements and marketing performance measures. The quantitative analysis results provide sufficient evidence to conclude that sales force competence management adopted by these firms affects their marketing performance through sales force competence analysis (SFCA), sales force competence development (SFCD), and sales force competence evaluation (SFCE). Figure 1 is a model generated from our analysis.

The model shows that an effective sales force competence management process, involving sale force competence analysis, sales force competence development and sales force competence evaluation, produces competent sales people, who exhibit the required skills, knowledge, and behavior in sales job that will ultimately be leading to continuous improvement in marketing performance that is evidence in sales volume, market share and profit.

The firm gets feedback regarding the status of its marketing performance by measuring its sales volume, market share, and profitability in relation to those of its previous years and competitors. Sales forces competence level is updated, from time to time based on the feedback and environmental challenges.

Figure 1: Sales force Competence Management and Marketing Performance Model
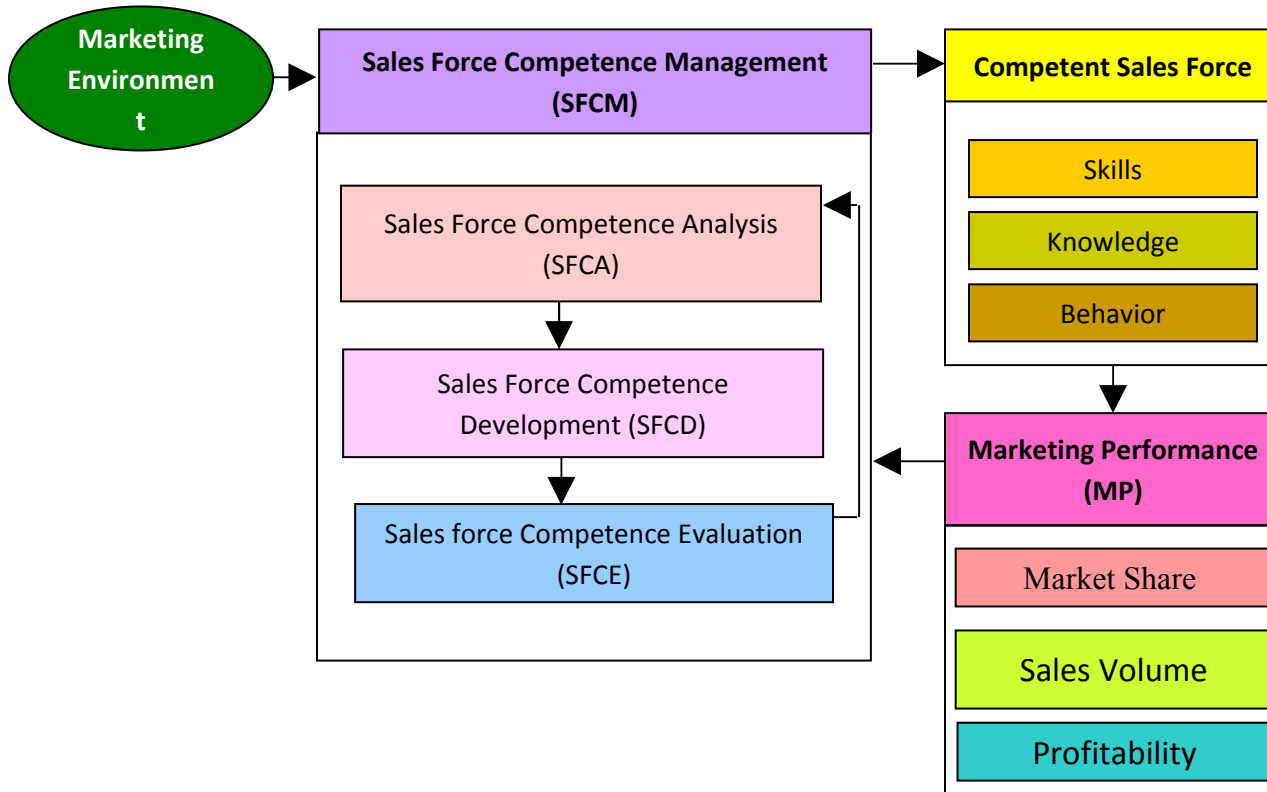
The implication is that marketing performance in terms of sales volume, market share and profitability can be substantially enhanced through the way sales force competence is managed in response to marketing environment.

This paper therefore recommend that decision-makers in these firms should recognize the dynamic nature of business environments and thus, be on the alert to respond promptly by having periodic analyses, development and evaluation of their sales force skill, knowledge, and behavior levels, with the view to updating them whenever it becomes strategically necessary. This will ensure that the sales people are effective, efficient, and motivated in their sales job, and will no doubt enhance their contribution to ensuring continuous improvement in their firms' marketing performance. Specifically, more emphasis should be on sales force competence development which will help provide the selling skills, counseling, exposure, and role modeling required for optimal performance of sales people. This sales force competence management model is important for accurate prediction of the need for training and retraining, as well as timely packaging of programs the firm always have competent sales force, which is necessary in achieving sound customer care, market orientation, value creation and customer relationship. These in turn, lead the firm win trail of and loyalty and switching to own brand, in the face of stiff global competition.

7. Research Limitation and Suggestions for Further Studies

Our findings are not likely to be generalized across all businesses other than the industrial and domestic products firms in Port Harcourt. To build external validity, we suggest that similar studies be conducted in other economic sectors, such as banking industry; and perhaps doing it repeatedly in cognizance of environmental dynamics.

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