

Marketing Research and the Potentials of SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa: Conceptual Evidence from Nigeria

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Abstract

This study evaluated the relevance of marketing research in unveiling the potentials of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in sub-Saharan Africa with conceptual evidence from Nigeria. The study attempted to paint the pictures of marketing research and SMEs within the context of entrepreneurial marketing scheme. The study also adopted schema theory, the cognitive scheme for processing and retrieving marketing information, as the underpinning theory for the study. The explanatory cross-sectional survey research design was adopted as the study guide. The population of the study is made up of all operators of SMEs in Nigeria. Using multi-stage sampling technique, 248 marketing research-oriented operators of SMEs were selected. A structured interview schedule, which contains a number of nominal construct items, was used as research instrument to generate primary data from respondents that cut across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients for all major constructs of the research instrument ranged between 0.73 and 0.81, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) which further served as additional evidence of convergent validity also ranged from 0.842 to 0.865. Data generated were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics. The study revealed that the relevance of marketing research in unveiling the potentials of SMEs in sub-Saharan Africa can only be appreciated in the context of marketing function. Public relations and corporate affairs, human resource and personnel management, marketing and strategic management, as well as financial planning and technical development were conceptualized as the functional areas of business in which marketing research can easily be deployed to unveil the potentials of SMEs for optimal performance in sub-Saharan African region. The study concluded that some concerted efforts are needed to be made to reinvigorate the activities of the SMEs in sub-Saharan Africa. Marketing research, as a modern commercial tool, provides the required insights, direction and guide for optimized economic performance and sustainability of micro, small and medium scale enterprises in the region.

Keywords: economic performance, entrepreneurial marketing, marketing function, marketing research, small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

1. Introduction

An evaluation of marketing research has almost invariably led to a consideration of the place of scientific thought and analysis in the "art" of marketing. An eclectic approach to the study of marketing has further reinforced the scientific study of human activity that is directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange process. According to Kotler & Armstrong (2006), any human activity that is directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange process is a marketing activity. On the other hand, Kotler & Keller (2006) remarks that marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and value with others. However, another picture emerges when research is conceived of as a systematic enquiry or examination to discover new information or relationship, and to expand the frontiers of knowledge for some specified purposes. According to Ogunbameru (2000), man has universally adopted three methods to comprehend the world around him; namely experience, reasoning and research. The third and final method by which man sets to discover truth is research. Kerlinger (1993) defines research as the systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the

presumed relations among natural/social phenomena.

Research is different from experience in several ways. First, research is systematic and controlled by basing its operations on inductive-deductive model, while experience deals with events occurring in a haphazard manner. Second, research is empirical. For instance, scientists always subject their notions to the court of empirical inquiry and test. Third, research is self-correcting. It has, for instance, built-in mechanisms to protect scientists from error as far as is humanly possible. Nevertheless, the procedures and results of research are open to public scrutiny by other fellow researchers (Cohen & Manon, 1996).

Prior to 1960, organized marketing research as a business was unknown in Nigeria and in most West African countries. Businesses in Nigeria, mainly trading, were operated by foreign capitalists who acted as though marketing research was irrelevant to their trading activities (Onwuteaka, 2006). Nigeria independence in 1960 opened up the country beyond Britain, while the discovery of the potentials of the country's economy, induced by its very large population, resulted in the influx of more foreign investors and thus competition. Understandably, some of the foreign trading companies were compelled by trading competition among them to consider investing in activities that would offer them greater understanding of their markets, although, such efforts were restricted to information about market sizes. This was the beginning of marketing research in Nigeria but no research agency, whether incorporated in Nigeria or resident therein, was involved.

Marketing research in Nigeria, then, was entirely about administering questionnaires drafted by foreign-based research agencies and sent to some key executives of multinational enterprises (MNEs) in Nigeria. This was the general practice in almost all corporate enterprises in the country. At the time, there was no record of any organization, either incorporated or registered, for the purpose of conducting marketing research in Nigeria. Research Bureau (UK) and Raymond Baker (USA) were the early research agencies that established their branches in Nigeria in the early 1970s. However, the first truly indigenous marketing research company, Ujamaa Consultants Limited, was incorporated in Nigeria in 1971. Ujamaa Consultants Limited also pioneered qualitative research in the country. Its only competitor in this respect was incorporated a few years later in 1976 (Onwuteaka, 2006). Some other early starters in the marketing research industry in Nigeria include Research & Marketing Services (RMS) Limited and Research International (RI) Limited among others (Asika, 1996).

Today, highly capitalized business enterprises, industries, corporate organizations, multinationals ventures, research foundations, consultancy outfits, organized civil societies and labour unions among others are employing the techniques of marketing research, in particular, and behavioral research, in general (Adeleke, 2003). This has consequently led to an increase in the demand for basic understanding of research methods and procedures employed by marketers and marketing practitioners in this contemporary regime of fairer trade in goods and services via trade liberalization and deregulated market economy.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Concepts of Marketing Research

Marketing research evolved as consumers and their preferences developed; hence the need for marketing research arises and grows as a consumer moves from one preference to the other. In recent times, most firms, regardless of their level of marketing coverage, are recognizing the importance of marketing research (Asika, 1996). A firm's growth and development in the marketplace depend greatly upon its ability to develop effective marketing research (Ibidunni, 2010). Firms therefore are looking for modern marketing research approaches to enhancing their market growth. However, thorough marketing research methods are desirable in solving the problems of firms' epileptic distribution and sales.

Moreover, it is a sound business practice that marketing policies should be propounded based on carefully planned research, and this is only possible by applying a systematic research methodology used in other areas of investigation. Marketing research has thus developed to a great extent. According to American Marketing Association (2009), marketing research is a systematic gathering, recording and analyzing of data about problems relating to the marketing of goods and services. It is against this backdrop that Ibidunni (2012) remarks that marketing research is the function that links the consumer, customer and general public to the marketer through information. Marketing research specifies the information required to address the issues relating to the identification of marketing opportunities and threats; evaluation of marketing actions; monitoring of marketing performance; and understanding of marketing as a process (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Furthermore, marketing research also designs the methods for collecting the information, manages and implements the data collection process, analyzes and communicates the findings and their implications (American Marketing Association, 2009).

On the other hand, marketing research, according to Palmer (2000), is about researching the whole of company's marketing process. It is in consonance with this perspective that Pride & Ferrel (2002) refer to the concept of marketing research as an evaluation of any of a variety of marketing variables: the product, sales, buyers' behavior, promotion, distribution, pricing, and packaging among others. Green & Tull (2008), however, refer to marketing research as the systematic and objective search for information, and the analysis of information relevant to the identification and solution of any problem in the field of marketing. Marketing research is therefore an area of applied data analysis whose purpose is to support marketing decision-making (Ibidunni, 2010).

Marketing research can be used to solve several problems that users of such research findings face. Marketing research is a firm's communication link with the environment and it can help marketing managers in planning, problem-solving and control (Kotler & Armstrong, 2006). Every company has its own way of using marketing research. Some use it on a continuous basis to track sales or to monitor the firm's market share. Other resort to it only when a problem arises or an important decision such as launching a new product needs to be made. A company's overall philosophy of how marketing research fits into its marketing plans determines its programme strategy for marketing research (McDonald, 2000). A programme strategy specifies the type of studies that are to be conducted and for what purposes; it might even specify how often these studies should be taken. Effective marketing, according to Fill (2009), requires that managers recognize the interdependence of various marketing activities and how they can be integrated to develop a marketing programme.

2.2 Concepts of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

As one of the developing economies in the world, Nigeria's economy is highly endowed with a number of business and investment potentials. These potentials are being made manifested via the abundance of human and natural resources that are presently available in the country that is popularly referred to as the most populous nation in the continent of Africa. According to Onu (2009), tapping these valuable resources require the ability to identify viable fields of endeavours in the areas of business, agriculture, science and technology among others. Entrepreneurs are the people who perceive these opportunities with their inherent intelligence, drive and hardwork and are making the best use of the opportunities that are available with the sweeping changes that are taking place on daily basis in the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

In realization of the changes in global economy, the concept of entrepreneurship has now become a matter of necessity to both the developed and the developing economies. Generally, in response to identified opportunities, entrepreneurship is the practice of starting new venture particularly new business. Hisrich & Peters (2002) refers to entrepreneurship as the process of creating new entity with value by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming the accompanying financial psychic and social risks and receiving the resulting rewards of monetary and personal satisfaction and independence. In the same vein, Drucker (1970) as cited in Ayodele (2006) emphasizes that entrepreneurship as all about taking risk. According to Drucker, the behaviour of an entrepreneur reflects a kind of person willing to put his or her career, finances and business acumen on the line so as to take risk or putting his or her idea, time and capital on an uncertain venture. Therefore, entrepreneurship goes beyond venturing into a new business but encompasses ability to take full responsibilities for action and decision to solve problems via creativity. However, both marketing and entrepreneurship are without doubt connected in principles and practices to bring about successful implementation and execution of policies and plans that can enhance the development of SMEs sector, most especially in this contemporary regime of fairer trade in ideas, goods and services (Onigbinde, 2014a).

Meanwhile, there is no universal description of SMEs since the term small and medium are relative and they differ from country to country and industry to industry. According to Ogunleye (2004), the difference amongst industries could be ascribed to the different capital requirements of each business, whilst those among countries could arise as a result of differences in industrial organizations of countries at different stages of economic development. What might therefore be defined as SME in a developed country can be regarded as a large-scale enterprise in a developing country, using such parameters as fixed investment and employment of the labour force (Onigbinde, 2014b). It is also important to recognize that definitions change over time and hence, even in a developing country what was previously classified as SME could be regarded as a large scale enterprise when the quantities of relevant parameter change during the production process.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

In this study, schema theory was adopted as the theoretical framework. The cognitive scheme for processing and retrieving marketing information certainly plays an important role in the perception of marketing-related activities. The basic of the schema theory, as propounded by Fiske & Kinder (1981), is that it is used for

processing new information while retrieving the old one. According to Graber (1988), schema is a cognitive structure consisting of organized knowledge about situations and individuals that have been abstracted from prior experiences.

The concept of schema has become widely used by psychologists, cognitive scientists, management theorists and marketing researchers because of its apparent usefulness in understanding how individuals process information. Fiske & Kinder (1981) suggests that individuals are cognitive misers whose limited complexity for dealing with information forces them to practise cognitive economy by forming simplified mental models.

Graber (1988) indicates that individuals use schemas to process new information from either the print or electronic media. She discovered from her research effort that individuals processing new information choose from a number of strategies including straight matching of a new information to a schema, processing through inferences and multiple integration of an information with several schemas or schema dimensions. Graber also discovered that in processing new information, individuals tend to score the conclusions drawn from the evidence, rather than evidence itself. She concludes that processing information through schemas is an effective means of dealing with an information overload, while the matching of information with schemas is influenced by cueing.

Severin & Tankard (2001) observed that the notion of schema can be of help in understanding how individual may process many news stories that could emanate from both the print and electronic media. It appears that every individual attempts to match the information that emanate from either the print or electronic media to some existing schema through a number of different matching strategies. If a match can be found, then some parts of the information are likely to be stored in the form of a modified schema. If a match cannot be found, the information is likely to pass by without being assimilated. In the same vein, the notion of schema can also be of help in understanding how individual consumer processes information that emanates from the marketing communication mix. Every individual consumer attempts to match the marketing information to some existing schema through a number of different matching strategies. If a match can be found, then some parts of the messages from advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and personal selling among other marketing communication mix are likely to be stored in the form of a modified schema. On the other hand, if a match cannot be found, the messages to marketing promotion prospects are likely to pass by without being assimilated.

4. Relevance of Marketing Research to SMEs Sector

The relevance of marketing research in unveiling the potentials of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in sub-Saharan Africa can only be appreciated if it is consistently seen in the context of marketing function. According to Onwuteaka (2006), marketing function focuses on the efforts to understand the needs of consumers or potential buyers; design products or services that can satisfy those needs within a competitive environment and with the objective of making a desired profit. Meanwhile, there is no gain saying the fact that marketing effort does not take place in an airtight compartment. It is always concerned with the matching of an organization's capabilities with the needs of its customers and those of ultimate consumers. However, in matching the organization's capabilities with the consumers' needs, the dynamic operating environment of an enterprise, which includes political and economic uncertainties, legal implications, cultural and religious constraints, and direct and indirect competition, must be thoroughly assessed and evaluated (Dixon-Ogbechi, 2003).

In the midst of all these, the marketing unit of an enterprise has its sales projections and targets to meet. Obviously, there is a need for marketing research at such crucial moment. It is against this backdrop that Bradley (2007) remarks that marketing research is the tool that provides such information that an enterprise, whether large or small, requires to make pro-active and better decisions. It is an inevitable tool for sustainable and profitable business operation in a competitive environment (Jobber, 2004). Marketing research is used in all aspects of a business to achieve enhanced performance (Kotler & Keller, 2006). Infact, the level to which a small/medium-sized enterprise can appropriately utilize the tools of marketing research determines the extent to which it can maximize opportunities available to it and gain competitive advantage for growth (Onwuteaka, 2006).

Moreover, a few of the functional areas of business in which marketing research can easily be deployed to unveil the potential of SMEs for optimal performance in sub-Saharan African region include the following among others.

4.1 Public Relations (PR) and Corporate Affairs

The way an enterprise is perceived by the general public determines, to a large extent, how its various offerings are also received (Onigbinde, 2013). This means that if an enterprise has a positive image in the minds of its various publics, then its products and services would benefit. According to Fortunato (2000), PR as a promotional strategy plays a pivotal role in selecting and framing mass media content that could influence public opinion and behavior. In the triangular relationship among PR, mass media and the audience, it has been demonstrated through PR strategies that an enterprise is productive in assisting the mass media content selection and framing processes. This study shows that maintaining relationship with customers via PR is very effective for future loyalty (Fortunato, 2000).

Furthermore, in an attempt to extend the frontiers of knowledge of the relationship between PR and customer loyalty, Hanzae & Farsani (2011) evaluate the effects of brand image and perceived PR on customer loyalty. Primary data were generated via a structured questionnaire distributed to LG Electronics consumers. Hierarchical regression analysis of data from 385 respondents was used to test the postulated hypothesis. The results show that perceived PR has a positive relationship with customer loyalty and that this relationship is moderated by brand image. According to Hanzae & Farsani (2011), when brand image is favourable, the positive effects of perceived PR on customer loyalty is significant.

Moreover, consumers' reactions to public relations depend on their levels of self-congruence and how their expectations match the enterprise's properties, which are presented through PR efforts (Hanzae & Farsani, 2011). If consumer self-concepts and perception of characteristics associations and values are identical to those of the business enterprise conducting PR activities, then consumers attach a higher degree of acceptance to the business enterprise. Higher consumer self-congruence enhances the establishment of commitment and meaningful relationship with the organization and intensifies customer loyalty. Therefore, organizations' PR practices can raise consumer self-congruence: the higher the self-congruence, the higher the customer loyalty and vice versa (Hsieh & Li, 2008). However, marketing research is used to identify the perceptions and opinion of the relevant publics and then illuminate decision areas that would impact positively on corporate image of an enterprise (Onwuteaka, 2006).

4.2 Human Resource (HR) and Personnel Management

In value-based management, it is said that the performance of a company is 80% people and 20% strategy (Eze, 2004). This means that the quality of people in an establishment determines, to some extent, the value the business can deliver. Therefore, it becomes essentially imperative for a business enterprise to understand, at all times, how its workforce is fairing in competitive terms, such as job enrichment and satisfaction, knowledge levels and skills, personal development and achievement, etc. All of these affect the performance and output of the workforce (Mullins, 2010).

Job enrichment, for instance, is an approach of adding additional motivators to job to make it more rewarding. It was developed by Fredrick Herzberg on the basis of his studies indicating that the most effective way to motivate workers was by focusing on higher order needs. Job enrichment refers to the vertical expansion of jobs. It seeks to add depth to a job by giving workers more control, responsibility and discretion over how their job is performed (Newstrom, 2011). In general terms, job enrichment is redesigning a job to increase its motivating potential (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2007). Job enrichment, therefore, increases the challenge of one's work by reversing the trend toward greater specialization.

On the other hand, job enrichment, according to Raza & Nawaz (2011), is referred to as designing jobs in a way that increases the opportunities for the workers to experience feelings of responsibility, achievement, growth and recognition. Thus, enriched jobs are said to be vertically loaded, and they organize tasks so as to allow the employee to do a complete activity, increase the employee's freedom and independence, increase responsibility and provide feedback, so that individual employee will be able to access and correct their own performance. (Robbins, Judge, Millet, & Waters-Marsh, 2008; Dost & Khan, 2012). However, marketing research is used to identify these and other relevant elements of people performance and provide a database and information stream that assist in high impact and quality decisions in this regard (Onwuteaka, 2006).

4.3 Marketing and Strategic Management

All of the decisions that are taken in value-based and productive marketing function of an enterprise are informed by marketing research (Adeleke, 2003). Marketing research covers products, whether tangible or intangible. It examines market reactions to such products, and by combining with technical products, research can reveal the platform on which consumers and manufacturers meet. Similarly, marketing research focuses the

markets (that is, the consumers). Since it studies the consumers who constitute the market; it also enhances market segmentation in relation to demand for particular products. Importantly, marketing research evaluates consumer perceptions and tries to advance reasons for such perceptions (Achumba, 2006). Furthermore, marketing research is also concerned with sales and distribution, because having established or projected the market, it can predict who and where the consumers are, as well as their strengths and how to reach them. It also reveals the consumers purchase habits: how they buy, when they buy and why they buy among others. Therefore, there is no gainsaying the fact that marketing research determines the products/brands to be introduced and offered to the consumers, including the functional and emotional attributes to project, the price levels and structure to adopt, the advertising and communications strategy to be employed, the distribution and selling methods that should be put in place. All these and many others should be determined through marketing research, if the objective is to achieve superior performance for the SMEs in the market place.

4.4 Financial Planning and Technical Development

Marketing research is quite versatile and wider in scope than is commonly known. Marketing research can be used even in accounting and financial planning as well as technical/technological developments. For instance, the application of marketing research in such areas such as costing and feasibility studies cannot but be emphasized. These are besides the non-business areas, such as political strategy formulation, social development planning and medical psychology inquiries, in which marketing research plays vital roles. Therefore, the strategic role of marketing research in unveiling the potentials of SMEs in sub-Saharan Africa cannot but be emphasized, most especially in this contemporary regime of fairer trade in goods and services.

5. Data and Methodology

This study adopted the explanatory cross-sectional survey research design as a guide in line with the research suggestion of Asika (2004). The population of the study is made up of all operators of SMEs that are currently in operations within the Nigerian business landscape. Using multi-stage sampling technique, two hundred and forty eight (248) marketing research-oriented operators of SMEs were formally selected. A structured interview schedule, which contains a number of nominal construct items, was used as research instrument to generate primary data from the selected respondents that cut across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria.

The data for North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South and South-West were generated from the selected marketing research-oriented operators of SMEs in Jos, Maiduguri, Kaduna, Onitsha, Port-Harcourt, and Ibadan respectively. The number of respondents selected from each geo-political zone was strictly in proportion to the number of delegates that registered during the national workshop that was organized by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Industry, and other non-governmental organizations.

Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients for all major constructs of the research instrument ranged between 0.73 and 0.81, while Average Variance Extracted (AVE) which further served as additional evidence of convergent validity also ranged from 0.842 to 0.865, which indicates strong reliability and high internal consistency of the measuring instrument (Nunnally, 1993). Data generated were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics as suggested by Kasumu (2000).

6. Results and Discussion of Findings

Findings based on the survey revealed that the understanding and application of the tenets of marketing research can enhance the potentials of SMEs in Nigeria, in particular, and sub-Saharan Africa, in general. In response to the first question, "To what extent do marketing research ideas and skills enhance the potentials of SMEs in Nigeria?" Majority of the respondents (71.8%) indicated that marketing research ideas and skills have helped them in enhancing their businesses' potentials, while the remaining 28.2% felt otherwise. From the position presented above, it could be adjudged that marketing research orientation goes a long way in enhancing the potentials of SMEs in Nigeria. However, in response to the second question, "To what extent does marketing research add value to the quality of products that are made by the SMEs?" Absolute majority of the respondents (89.56%) were of the opinion that marketing research adds significant value to the quality of products that emanate from the staples of SMEs, while only a negligible percentage (10.44%) thought the other way round. From the position presented in the preceding sentence, it could be admitted that marketing research adds market value to the quality of SMEs' products.

Furthermore, in response to the third question, "To what extent does marketing research enhance customer information in the SMEs' sector?" Many of the respondents (66.47%) indicated that marketing research enhance customer database among the operators of SMEs, while the remaining 33.53% felt otherwise. From the position

presented above, it becomes imperative to conclude that marketing research enhances customer database for quality service delivery among the operators of the SMEs. Similarly, in response to the fourth question, "To what extent does the application of marketing research enhances the continuity of the SMEs' operations in Nigeria?" Most of the respondents (72.39%) were of the opinion that the application of marketing research enhances the going concern of the SMEs in Nigeria. However, few of the respondents (27.61%) thought the other way round. Therefore, it could be adjudged, based on the respondents' levels of perception, that the application of marketing research goes a long way in enhancing the sustainability of the SMEs' operations in Nigeria.

Moreover, the findings from this study are in congruence with the proposition of Bradley (2007) that marketing research is a tool that provides the information that an enterprise, whether large or small, requires to make pro-active and better decisions. Similarly, the findings are also in consonance with the perspective of Jobber (2004) that marketing research is an inevitable tool for profitable and sustainable business operation in a competitive environment. Furthermore, the findings are also in alignment with the proposition of Kotler & Keller (2006) that marketing research is used in all aspects of a business to achieve enhanced performance. In addition, the findings are also in tandem with the perspective of Onwuteaka (2006) that the level to which a small/medium-sized enterprise can appropriately utilize the tools of marketing research determines the extent to which such enterprise can maximize opportunities available to it and gain competitive advantage for growth.

7. Evaluation and Conclusion

Having examined the relevance of marketing research in unveiling the potentials of SMEs in a liberalized economy, there is no gainsaying that the cardinal objectives of a liberalized economy are to allow and indeed, encourage higher inflow of investments, both local and foreign, as well as enhanced private sector participation and initiatives in economic developments (Onwuteaka, 2006). To attain the proceeding objectives, some concerted efforts are needed to be made to reinvigorate the activities of the SMEs in sub-Saharan African countries. Marketing research, as a modern commercial tool, provides the required insights, direction and guide for optimized economic performance and sustainability of micro, small and medium scale enterprises.

In the contemporary global operating environment, where knowledge gives the competitive leverage for effective and successful development, the role of marketing research is to provide and project such business; social and political information and knowledge that are needed to elevate economic performance and social development as well as facilitate positive political reforms. It does this by appropriately identifying the key opportunities in the operating environment, assessing their scope and viability and then proposing for appropriate implementation of those opportunities and projects with the greatest values and benefits in context of the environmental characteristics.

The essence of business enterprise is to develop and maintain a customer-base that would not only patronize the offerings of the business some of the times but one that is growing and loyal to the products and services of the business, throughout its life span. In a competitive market environment, customer patronage and subsequent loyalty is only possible if a business can provide, at all times, superior product packages which are perceived by customers to be of greater value than those of competing offerings. The needs and expectations of customers are however dynamic; undergoing rapid changes arising from contending factors such as growing customer awareness, changing life style, experience and exposure; diminishing interests in a product, after long usage; easy availability of equally good and perhaps better alternatives from competition; among others. Therefore, to continue in profitable business venture, information regarding the current state of customer needs, expectations and experiences, at all times, should not only be available, but on time and in such form, that is clear, simple and easy to act upon for positive and sustainable results.

Marketing research is the tool that provides such information and insights that businesses require to make pro-active and better decisions. Given this scenario, it is suffice to state that marketing research is an inevitable tool for sustainable and profitable business operation in a competitive and liberalized environment. It is also a modern business tool used in all the key aspects of a business operation, such as public relations and corporate affairs, human resource and personnel management, marketing and strategic management, and financial planning and technical development, among others, to achieve superior performance. In fact, the level to which the micro, small and medium enterprises can appropriately utilize the tools of marketing research determines the extent to which they can maximize opportunities available to it and gain competitive advantage for growth.

7.1 Recommendations

From the evaluation done and conclusion drawn from the conceptual analysis above, the following recommendations therefore become imperative:

- 1) Government in a liberalized environment should focus and provide a more enabling environment for the growth and survival of micro, small and medium enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa.
- 2) The outcome of liberalization in sub-Saharan Africa should be a re-invigorated and revitalised economy with the expanding demand capacity and increasing competition. Survival and sustainability of new business venture under this situation would then depend on efficient and productive operations which could be articulated via the adoption of marketing research practice.
- 3) Application of the basic tenets of marketing research becomes imperative if the concomitant objectives of the SMEs' sector are going to be fully realized, most especially in this contemporary regime of fairer trade in goods and services.
- 4) The SMEs in the sub-Saharan African region need to develop and maintain a customer base that would not only patronize the offerings of the business some of the time but one that is growing and loyal to the products and services of the business, throughout its life span.
- 5) It becomes imperative for the SMEs in the sub-region to appropriately identify the key opportunities in their operating environments. These opportunities can be appropriately identified and harnessed with the aid of marketing research instrument.
- 6) It also becomes more essential for the SMEs to provide superior product packages which would be perceived by customers to be of greater value than those of competing offerings.

7.2 Suggestions for Future Research

The forgoing recommendations, however, contain some grave lessons for the marketing practitioners and customer-oriented owners-managers of SMEs in the developing economies; as Nigeria imbibe the lessons of new forms of the possible roles of marketing research in enhancing the potentials of micro, small and medium enterprises in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, the future researchers may extend the frontiers of knowledge by making a comparative analysis between the marketing opportunities that exist in sub-Saharan Africa vis-à-vis other regions across the globe. Future researchers are also encouraged to embark on the evaluation of marketing research function in enhancing the potentials of other vital sectors of any developing economy. Further research efforts are also needed to evaluate the possible role of marketing research in enhancing SMEs' potentials in both developed and developing economies. These suggestions would certainly mitigate the developmental deficits that exist in the macroeconomic frameworks of many developing countries and as well provide further opportunities for SMEs' growth in those countries.

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