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MARKETING ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY SALES FORCE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Marketing ethics involve the moral principles and accepted behaviour that guide marketing practices and profession, hence the sales force work with these principles but most times deviate from it in order to achieve their set target and meet-up with company objective. Although this is unethical in marketing and adversely affect sales force performance. It is against this backdrop that the study examined the effect of marketing ethics on sales force performance. The specific objectives of the study were to (i) identify ethical challenges faced by contemporary salespersons (ii) examine the influence of ethical conduct on consumers trust and loyalty. This is a desk research and other secondary sources were consulted to guide the conduct of the study with inclusion and exclusion criteria formulated by the researchers. From the secondary sources conducted, findings revealed that consumers value consistent ethical behaviour, fostering trust and long-term loyalty from the sales force. The study concluded that objective selling tactics and trust should be embraced by contemporary sales force. Therefore, it is recommended that sales force should avoid deception, hard selling and mis-representation during sales presentation.

Keywords: Consumer trust, Customer loyalty, Contemporary Salespersons, Marketing Ethics

1.0 Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the hospitality industry, the role of salespersons is pivotal in driving business success (Delpechitre et al., 2020). The contemporary sales environment, however, is fraught with intricate ethical considerations that demand careful examination. As organizations strive to meet customer demands and achieve competitive advantages, ethical dilemmas arise, necessitating a profound understanding of the ethical dimensions surrounding sales practices. The importance of ethical considerations in the hospitality industry cannot be overstated, as the sector inherently involves interpersonal interactions, customer satisfaction, and the establishment of trust (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Guerra-Baez, 2016). Salespersons, as key intermediaries between businesses and consumers, play a critical role in shaping the ethical reputation of their organizations. Therefore, understanding the ethical intricacies faced by salespersons becomes imperative for fostering a culture of responsible marketing within the hospitality industry. Against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive marketplace, the ethical conduct of salespersons takes on added significance. Contemporary consumers are not only well-informed but also socially conscious, placing a premium on transparency, integrity, and socially responsible business practices (Bediako, 2017). As such, any ethical lapses by salespersons in the hospitality industry can have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only individual transactions but also the overall reputation and brand image of the organization. The necessity for this study arises from the growing importance of ethical business practices in contemporary markets, particularly within the hospitality industry. As consumer awareness and

expectations regarding corporate responsibility and ethical conduct continue to rise, businesses, and sales professionals, in particular, are confronted with the challenge of navigating a complex landscape fraught with ethical dilemmas. Studies by Lacznia and Murphy (2006) emphasize the intrinsic tension between individual and organizational goals, underscoring the need for businesses, including those in the hospitality sector, to strike a delicate balance that aligns personal values with corporate objectives. Additionally, the work of Droge and Calantone (2004) highlights the potential pitfalls of aggressive selling tactics, shedding light on the ethical implications of such approaches in the pursuit of sales objectives. The multifaceted nature of ethical challenges necessitates a nuanced examination to provide actionable insights for sales professionals operating in the hospitality industry. Moreover, the hospitality sector, characterized by its dynamic and customer-centric nature, presents unique challenges for salespersons. The study by Dubinsky and Loken (1989) reveals the impact of cultural differences on ethical issues in personal selling, emphasizing the need for a culturally sensitive approach. As the industry becomes increasingly globalized, understanding and addressing these cross-cultural challenges become imperative for sales professionals. Furthermore, Pettijohn et al. (2008) highlight the ethical dimensions of salesperson burnout, emphasizing the need for organizations to provide support to mitigate the impact of job stressors on ethical decision-making capabilities. The confluence of these challenges necessitates an in-depth exploration to inform strategies and practices that uphold ethical standards in the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary sales within the hospitality industry. Hence, this study examined the impact of marketing ethics on the performance of sales force in the hospitality industry.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to understand marketing ethics in today's market among contemporary salespersons in the hospitality industry. The specific objectives were to;

- i. Identify ethical challenges faced by contemporary salespersons
- ii. Examine the influence of ethical conduct on consumers trust and loyalty

2.0 Literature Review

Concept of Ethics in Marketing

The concept of ethics in marketing is a fundamental cornerstone that shapes the interactions between businesses and consumers, laying the groundwork for trust and long-term relationships. At its core, marketing ethics revolves around the principles of fairness, transparency, and responsibility in all stages of the marketing process. Smith and Quelch (1996) underscore the significance of ethical marketing practices, arguing that consumers are not only discerning of ethical behavior but are more likely to trust and remain loyal to companies that consistently demonstrate such conduct. For instance, when a company provides accurate and transparent information in its advertising, consumers are more likely to feel confident and trust the brand. This aligns with the broader understanding that ethical marketing is not just a moral imperative but a strategic business practice that contributes to the sustainability of customer relationships.

Ethical marketing extends beyond the communication and promotion of products to encompass the entire value chain of a business. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) delve into the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its profound influence on consumer trust. Companies engaging in ethical and socially responsible practices, such as supporting community initiatives or adopting sustainable production methods, not only enhance their brand image but also contribute to the broader societal good. For example, a company that prioritizes fair labor practices and environmentally friendly sourcing not only aligns with ethical standards but also resonates positively with consumers who increasingly value socially responsible businesses. This reflects the interconnectedness of ethical

behavior, consumer perceptions, and the overall reputation of a brand. However, the concept of ethics in marketing is not without its challenges, particularly in industries where aggressive sales tactics or deceptive practices may be more prevalent. Creyer and Ross Jr. (1997) discuss the role of ethical considerations in consumer decision-making, emphasizing that consumers actively prefer products from companies with a reputation for ethical conduct. This implies that unethical practices, such as misleading advertisements or manipulative sales tactics, can have detrimental effects on consumer trust and loyalty. For instance, a study by Kotler et al. (2015) found that deceptive marketing practices not only erode trust but also lead to negative word-of-mouth, potentially harming the brand's long-term prospects. Therefore, the concept of ethics in marketing serves as a critical navigational tool for businesses, guiding them towards practices that not only adhere to moral principles but also contribute to building a positive and enduring relationship with their consumer base.

Individual Ethical Decision-Making

The individual ethical decision-making of sales professionals within the hospitality industry is a complex process influenced by a myriad of factors that shape their responses to ethical challenges. Scholars have extensively explored the role of personal values, moral development, and ethical awareness in guiding salespersons through these dilemmas. One crucial aspect is the influence of personal values on ethical decision-making. Researchers like Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) suggest that an individual's ethical predisposition, rooted in their personal values, significantly affects the choices they make in sales scenarios. For instance, a sales professional who prioritizes honesty and integrity in their personal life may be more inclined to adopt similar ethical standards in their professional role, choosing transparency over deceptive tactics. Moral development, as proposed by Kohlberg and Kramer (1969), is another dimension that shapes individual ethical decision-making. The stages of moral development, ranging from pre-conventional to post-conventional, elucidate how individuals perceive and respond to ethical dilemmas. In the context of sales professionals in the hospitality industry, an individual at a higher stage of moral development may be more likely to consider the broader societal implications of their actions. For example, a salesperson at the post-conventional level might prioritize the well-being of both the customer and the organization, weighing the consequences of their decisions on various stakeholders. Ethical awareness is a critical factor influencing how salespersons navigate ethical challenges. Singhapakdi et al. (1999) discuss the importance of recognizing ethical issues in marketing situations, emphasizing that ethical awareness precedes ethical decision-making.

Organizational Influences on Sales Ethics

The ethical conduct of sales professionals in the hospitality industry is profoundly influenced by organizational factors that shape the overall ethical climate within the business. Examining the impact of these organizational influences provides valuable insights into understanding how sales ethics are cultivated and sustained. One pivotal aspect is organizational culture, which plays a central role in establishing the norms and values that guide ethical decision-making. As Ferrell and Gresham (1985) posit, an organizational culture that prioritizes integrity, transparency, and ethical behavior tends to foster a climate where sales professionals are more likely to align their actions with ethical standards. For instance, a company in the hospitality sector that values customer trust as a core element of its culture is likely to encourage ethical sales practices, promoting honesty and reliability in customer interactions.

Leadership practices within an organization also exert a significant impact on the ethical conduct of sales professionals. Laczniak, Kempf & Muehling (1999) emphasize the role of leadership in creating an ethical climate, suggesting that leaders who demonstrate a commitment to ethical values set the tone

for the entire sales team. In the hospitality industry, effective leaders prioritize ethical decision-making and inspire sales professionals to align their behaviors with these principles. For example, a sales manager who consistently communicates the importance of truthful and customer-centric approaches can influence the ethical conduct of the entire sales team.

Sales Tactics and Ethical Boundaries

The exploration of sales tactics and ethical boundaries within the hospitality industry unveils a nuanced landscape where the methods employed by sales professionals can significantly impact both customer perceptions and the overall reputation of the business. Aggressive selling techniques, as investigated by Droge and Calantone (2004), pose ethical dilemmas, particularly when they compromise the principles of transparency and customer well-being. For instance, pressuring customers into making quick decisions, overselling services, or employing high-pressure tactics to meet sales targets can lead to negative consequences, eroding trust and potentially damaging the long-term relationship between the business and its clientele.

Deceptive strategies in sales, as discussed by Kotler et al. (2015), present another ethical challenge in the hospitality industry. Misleading customers through false advertising, inaccurate claims about amenities, or manipulating pricing structures can result in immediate gains but often lead to negative repercussions. For example, if a hotel uses deceptive tactics to attract customers, the ensuing dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth can tarnish its reputation and diminish customer trust. Balancing the achievement of sales targets with ethical standards is crucial, and understanding the implications of deceptive strategies is vital for sales professionals operating in the competitive hospitality sector.

Salesperson Unethical Behaviour

Unethical salesperson behavior represents a breach of trust and ethical standards in the realm of sales, raising concerns about the integrity of business practices (Bush et al., 2017). Numerous studies and observations shed light on various dimensions of unethical behavior exhibited by sales professionals. One prevalent unethical behavior is the use of deceptive sales tactics (Mavlanova, Benbunan-Fich & Kumar, 2008). Salespersons may resort to misleading customers about product features, prices, or the benefits of a service to secure a sale. This tactic, although potentially resulting in short-term gains, undermines customer trust and damages the reputation of both the salesperson and the organization (Guenzi & Georges, 2010).

Aggressive selling techniques are another facet of unethical behavior in sales. This may involve high-pressure tactics, coercion, or manipulation to force a customer into making a purchase (Haytko, Clark & Zboja, 2017). The pursuit of meeting sales targets or achieving quotas sometimes drives salespersons to engage in overly assertive approaches, disregarding the customer's needs and preferences. Such behavior not only jeopardizes the immediate sale but also leads to negative consequences in terms of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Incomplete or selective disclosure of information is a common unethical sales practice. Salespersons may withhold crucial details about a product or service, conveniently omitting information that could potentially dissuade a customer from making a purchase (Drichoutis, Lazaridis & Nayga Jr, 2006). This lack of transparency creates an imbalance in the buyer-seller relationship and erodes the foundation of trust, which is essential for sustainable customer relationships.

Kickbacks and bribery are unethical behaviors that can occur in sales, particularly in B2B transactions (Burduja & Zaharia, 2019). Salespersons may offer or accept kickbacks or bribes to influence purchasing decisions in their favor. Such practices not only violate ethical standards but also breach legal regulations, leading to severe consequences for both the individual salesperson and the

organization. In the digital age, unethical behavior can extend to online sales and e-commerce. For instance, fraudulent online transactions, deceptive marketing practices on digital platforms, or the misuse of customer data are unethical behaviors that can harm consumers and tarnish the reputation of businesses.

Responsible Salesforce Marketing Practice

Customers need recognition, appreciation, value and adequate information regarding company's product most especially service industry where product features are intangible, inseparability, variability and perishability in nature. Witt (2020) in her findings with connected customer report came up with four variables that guided the practice of responsible salesforce.

- i. **Security:** Customers are concerned about how secure their data, financial and identity-related risks are been saved, used and control, and marketers are concerned about the impact on their brand's image of appearing not mindful of or invested in security and privacy. This is the prime responsibility of a responsible salesforce for the organization to achieve her marketing objective.
- ii. **Sharing Data:** Information about company's brand is vital to all customer, they expected salesforce to disclose all data regarding data about the company, product, affiliate and value attached to the product. While customers might be aware of the connection between a parent company's different brands, it can be confusing or alarming to feel they're being marketed to by products they don't necessarily aware or have no knowledge of.
- iii. **Irrelevant Personalisation:** Most times, customers shared their experiences of receiving marketing activities that underscored information about them in an unexpected ways, such as gender when they're nonconforming, or marketing based on one-time searches or purchases, as they aren't reflective of who they are or what they're looking for most of the time. Here, salesforce must have correct data and understand customer's perception and preference towards company brand.

Theoretical Review

This theory is underpinned by theory of utilitarianism and theory of value ethics

Theory of Utilitarianism

One of the foundational ethical theories, utilitarianism, proposes that the ethicality of an action is determined by its overall utility or happiness it produces. In the context of hospitality sales, a utilitarian approach may be applied by salespersons aiming to maximize the overall satisfaction of customers and stakeholders. For instance, promoting a hotel package that genuinely enhances the guest experience and fulfills their expectations aligns with the utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness. However, the utilitarian perspective introduces challenges when faced with the temptation to employ manipulative marketing tactics for short-term gains. The dilemma arises when salespersons prioritize their own interests or the interests of the business over the genuine well-being of customers.

Theory of Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, as advocated by Aristotle, focuses on the development of virtuous character traits as the foundation for ethical decision-making. In the hospitality industry, this theory suggests that salespersons should cultivate virtues such as honesty, integrity, and transparency to guide their actions. By embodying these virtues, salespersons contribute to building trust with customers and fostering long-term relationships. However, the challenges arise when competitive pressures and performance metrics incentivize salespersons to compromise on virtues in pursuit of sales targets. The intrigues faced by contemporary salespersons in the hospitality industry are nuanced and multifaceted. Utilitarianism

and virtue ethics provide valuable frameworks for understanding and addressing the ethical challenges encountered by salespersons.

3.0 Methodology

The study utilizes a desk research design, drawing information from secondary sources. According to Ghauri and Grunhaug (2005), This study rely absolutely on secondary sources and this include sources such as journal articles, textbooks, conference papers, and dissertations accessed by the researcher. In the course of this investigation, the constructs of interest are marketing ethics, contemporary salespersons, hospitality industry.

A judgmental sampling approach guided the selection of articles from journal outlets, incorporating specific criteria such as keyword search terms relating to the subject of inquiry. The chosen articles conform to the requirement of being written in the English language, and the research study spans a decade, covering the years 2013 to 2023. The determination of the sample size for this study was qualitative, involving the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined above. This resulted in a sampling frame comprising a total of twenty (20) articles retrieved from various electronic databases. The data for this study were gathered using electronic databases, with specific numbers of articles obtained from various platforms: researchgate.com (5), academia.edu (5), Google-scholar (8), semantic scholar (2). The review process involved reading through abstracts and applying exclusion criteria to refine and select the relevant articles (20) for inclusion in this study. The data analysis for this study employed various techniques, including the use of frequency tables to illustrate the sources of journals utilized in the research.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

Years of Publications	Frequency	(%)	Database/Source
2013-2018	5	25.0	Research Gate
2013-2017	5	25.0	Academia.edu
2014-2020	8	40.0	Google Scholar
2013-2017	2	10.0	Semantic Scholar
Total	20	100.0	

Source: Researchers' Compilation, 2023

Discussion of Findings

In the dynamic landscape of contemporary sales, salespersons encounter a myriad of ethical challenges that stem from the evolving nature of business practices and consumer expectations. These challenges, when left unaddressed, can have profound implications for both individuals and organizations. Drawing on various scholarly works, this discussion aims to delve into the ethical quandaries faced by contemporary salespersons and shed light on the complexities of their professional environment. One notable ethical challenge confronting salespersons is the temptation to engage in deceptive practices in pursuit of sales targets. As noted by Smith and Quelch (1996), the pressure to meet quotas and achieve performance metrics can sometimes lead salespersons to exaggerate product benefits or misrepresent features to potential customers. This creates a moral dilemma, where the short-term gains from securing a sale clash with the long-term consequences of eroding trust and damaging the reputation of both the salesperson and the organization. Furthermore, the advent of digital marketing and social media introduces the challenge of maintaining transparency in sales interactions. Contemporary consumers are increasingly informed and connected, relying on online reviews and peer recommendations. Therefore, salespersons must navigate the fine line between promoting their products and providing accurate, transparent information to avoid breaching ethical boundaries (Brenkert, 2008). Another ethical concern arises from the use of persuasive techniques that border on manipulation. Salespersons may encounter situations where the line between ethical persuasion and manipulation

becomes blurred. Cialdini (2001) highlights the power of influence and persuasion in sales but underscores the importance of ethical considerations to prevent manipulation, coercion, or exploitation of customers.

5.0 Conclusions

In examining the extensive body of literature on the influence of ethical conduct on consumer trust and loyalty, several noteworthy conclusions emerged. The collective findings underscore that ethical business practices, ranging from marketing strategies and sales interactions to leadership behaviour and organizational culture, play a pivotal role in shaping enduring relationships with consumers. Literature reviewed emphasize that consumers are not only discerning of ethical behaviour but also more likely to trust and remain loyal to companies that consistently demonstrate such conduct. The positive correlation between ethical practices and consumer trust is further affirmed by research on corporate citizenship, ethical leadership, and sales behavior, as concluded from the previous studies examined by the researchers. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the impact of ethical considerations extends across diverse sectors, from the financial services industry. Ethical conduct, whether manifested in corporate social responsibility, service delivery, or advertising, is identified as a significant driver of consumer loyalty. The studies collectively highlight the holistic nature of ethical influence on consumer trust, shaping perceptions at both the individual and organizational levels. As the present study seeks to contribute to this rich tapestry of research, it acknowledges the cumulative wisdom derived from these scholarly works, providing a robust foundation for further exploration into the dynamic interplay between ethical conduct, consumer trust, and loyalty in the contemporary business landscape.

6.0 Recommendations

Building upon the insights gleaned from the extensive literature on ethical conduct, consumer trust, and loyalty, several recommendations emerge for businesses aiming to foster positive relationships with their customer base:

- i. Establish a strong ethical culture within the organization. Leaders should model ethical behavior, and organizational values should be transparent and aligned with ethical principles. This foundation sets the tone for ethical conduct throughout the business.
- ii. Design marketing strategies that prioritize transparency, honesty, and authenticity. Avoid deceptive practices and ensure that advertising messages accurately represent products or services. Ethical marketing builds trust and fosters long-term customer loyalty.
- iii. Train sales teams to prioritize ethical sales practices. Salespersons should avoid deceptive tactics and focus on building trust through transparent communication. Ethical sales interactions contribute significantly to the development of trust and customer loyalty.
- iv. Clearly communicate the company's ethical values to consumers. This can be achieved through various channels, including corporate communications, product packaging, and online platforms. Consistent and transparent communication reinforces the commitment to ethical conduct.

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