



"Marketing Experiences and Customer Retention in the Indian Telecommunications Sector"

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ABSTRACT:

The Indian Telecommunications Industry stands out as the world's fastest-growing and most competitive sector, boasting the largest subscriber base in Asia. With heightened competition within the Indian telecommunications landscape, customer retention has emerged as a focal point for telecommunications providers. This paper aims to investigate the impact of experience marketing on customer retention in the Indian Telecommunications industry. Utilizing primary data collected through a validated set of structured questionnaires, distributed to a selected sample of 402 respondents across the country, the study employed correlation and regression analysis to test formulated research questions and hypotheses. The findings revealed a robust and positive correlation between experience marketing and customer retention in the Indian Telecommunications industry. The study concludes that Customer Service Quality, Customer Brand Relationship, and Customer Emotional Experience serve as significant indicators and dimensions of Experience Marketing, contributing to enhanced customer retention in Telecommunication Firms in India. Recommendations include a shift from traditional marketing approaches to an experience-based marketing strategy for Telecommunication operators in India to stay relevant and competitive in the globalized telecommunications industry.

KEYWORDS: Experience marketing, experiential marketing strategy, customer emotional experience, customer service quality, customer-brand relationship.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of consumer behavior, the inclination is not merely towards purchasing a product but also towards seeking an enduring and enriching experience throughout the consumption journey. The attainment of such an experience holds the potential to significantly contribute to the establishment and enhancement of the brand image for organizations. According to Schmitt (2003), the concept of experience has evolved into a pivotal factor for today's consumers. Experience, in this context, is the result of encountering various elements and serves as the culmination of individual events, such as marketing efforts both before and after the purchase (McLuhan, 2008). It involves direct observation or active participation in events, whether they are real, dream-like, or virtual. Although experiences are often induced and not spontaneous, they play a crucial role in consumer interactions.

Both personal experiences and consumer emotions emerge as potent and effective marketing strategies capable of influencing consumer purchase decisions (Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Xiao, 2004). Personal experiences are particularly instrumental in forging a connection with a brand and making informed

purchasing decisions. When executed adeptly, they serve as the most influential tool for cultivating customer loyalty (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). According to Kotler and Keller (2006), emotions tied to consumption significantly impact a consumer's satisfaction judgment. A stellar customer experience invariably leads to satisfaction, fostering the establishment of customer brand loyalty. In essence, brand-loyal consumers often demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium for a brand, perceiving a unique value that sets it apart from others (Xiao, 2004).

It is imperative to highlight that a well-crafted experience not only engages the consumer but also becomes memorable, allowing for unbiased interpretation. This perspective aligns with Shaw and Ivens' (2005) assertion that the growth of quality, intensity, meaning, and value are outcomes of a well-orchestrated experience. Positive experiences should be institutionalized within the system to ensure that all touchpoints consistently deliver the brand essence. This approach minimizes the gap between the brand promise and its delivery, aiming to connect consumers with brands in personally relevant and memorable ways. It provides customers with opportunities to engage and interact with brands, products, and services on a sensory level (Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle, 2006).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The growth of the telecommunications industry in India has created both opportunities and challenges for stakeholders. Competition has increased among major telecom companies as they vie for the saturated customer base. The main challenge for mobile operators is to develop and implement effective marketing activities to not only attract new subscribers but also retain existing ones who can become loyal customers.

There's a widely accepted argument that it's more cost-effective to keep existing customers than to acquire new ones. The competition is intensified by the lower switching costs among subscribers on different networks, as seen in the frequent movement between networks. Subscribers can acquire a SIM (Subscribers Identification Module) for as little as ₹100, making it financially feasible for them to switch easily between networks. This has a significant negative impact on GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications) operators, who face challenges in retaining and building loyalty among existing customers. Recognizing the intensifying competition, service providers in the GSM market understand the importance of retaining existing customers as much as attracting new ones.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Broad Objective:

To investigate the relationship between experience marketing strategy and customer retention in the telecommunications industry of India.

2. Specific Objectives:

(i) To determine the influence of customer experience management on customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry.

(ii) To assess the impact of customer service quality on customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry.

(iii) To examine the extent to which the customer-brand relationship affects customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Traditional Marketing to Experience Marketing

In the contemporary landscape of consumer decision-making, the sway of sensory factors has become a significant influence, propelling experience marketing as the predominant trend. Today's consumers no longer solely purchase products for problem-solving or functional purposes; they also seek enjoyment and entertainment in their shopping experiences (Verhoef, 2003). The buying behavior has transitioned from a purely rational approach to one that encompasses playful leisure activities, aesthetic enjoyment, and emotional responses, a shift identified by researchers in the late 1970s (Ismail, 2010).

Consumer behavior research has evolved from the traditional perspective of rational choices to a focus on emotional and affective needs. The experiential perspective frames consumption as a subjective state of consciousness with symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria (Allorza, 2008).

Pine II and Gilmore (1999) highlighted the evolution of economic value from commodities, goods, and services to experiences. Unique experiences can differentiate themselves from competitors, allowing for premium pricing. In a competitive environment, offering quality products or services alone is no longer sufficient. Schmitt (1999) identified a new stage in marketing that centers on experiences rather than functions or packages. Experiential marketing is deemed valuable for identifying market niches, steering away from price wars or product function competitions.

While experiential consumption research has gained attention, the impact of experiential marketing on consumer behavior still requires exploration. Scholars emphasize the significance of experiential marketing in various domains, including arts (Petkus, 2004), tourism (Hannam, 2004), and sports. This paper employs the example of the telecommunications industry, gathering empirical data to explore the experiential elements and the experiential process of consumers. The goal is to provide substantial evidence regarding the potential influence of experiential marketing on revenues.

Kotler (2003) categorizes marketing into two types: Traditional and modern marketing. The ascendancy of modern marketing over traditional marketing is attributed to its emphasis on the concepts of customer experience and experiential marketing. Kotler (2003) notes the increasing number of companies that engage psychologists and anthropologists to develop non-rational images and messages that deeply resonate with consumers. Holbrook (2000) predicts that as markets transition into the era of experiential marketing, the primary focus will shift from product performance to experience performance. Table 1 delineates the distinctions between traditional marketing and modern marketing.

Table 1:

	Traditional marketing	Experience marketing
Focus	Product features and benefits	Holistic consumer experience
Scope	Narrow definition of product categories and consumption	Broader consumption situation and socio-cultural context
Customer Mental Model	Rational decision maker	Rational and emotional being- feeling fantasies and fun
Market's Approach	Analytical, verbal and quantitative	Eclectic, verbal, visual and intuitive

Source: Kotler, P. (2003). *Marketing Insights from A-Z: 80 Concepts Every Manager Needs to Know*. John Wiley and Sons Incorporated

Customer Experience Management (CEM)

Customer Experience Management (CEM) is the strategic administration of a customer's encounter with a product or service (Saba, 2014). In contrast, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) primarily focuses on transaction recording and building relationships by emphasizing the experiences customers undergo during their interactions with a company. CEM progresses the continuum of customer relationships (Saba, 2014). Effectively managing customer emotions is crucial for acquiring and retaining customers, as these emotions play a pivotal role in creating or diminishing organizational value (Shaw, 2007) and can contribute to relationship dissolution, often influenced by intuition (Helm, 2005). In the current era of intense competition, achieving mere customer satisfaction is insufficient. Firms must strive for a heightened level of customer satisfaction to cultivate strong loyalty (Lilja and Wiklund, 2006). This underscores the importance of examining marketing from an experiential perspective.

Customer Service Quality

In the current business landscape, the perceived quality of a product has emerged as the paramount competitive factor, marking this era as the "quality era" (Ahn et al., 2006). Consequently, service marketing experts and researchers have presented various metaphors to underscore its significance. Choi et al. (2006), Joseph (2010), and Venelis and Ghauri (2004) identify it as the most potent competitive weapon, while Clow (1993) likened it to the organization's life-giving blood. Services have increasingly become a substantial component for many organizations, both regionally and globally, serving as a pivotal tool for revenue generation. Knowledge-intensive service businesses in today's landscape necessitate reliable methods for measurement, assessment, and improvement (Spohrer and Maglio, 2008). Service quality is gauged by calculating the difference between two scores, with superior service quality resulting in a smaller gap (Landrum et al., 2008).

Customer Brand Relationship

The development of a customer brand relationship evolves over time based on the customer's prior experiences with a brand (Bowden, 2009). The brand serves as a mechanism that engages both the buyer and the seller, intending to cultivate a long-term customer-brand relationship, often referred to as the relationship builder. This relationship stems from the brand experience, brand knowledge, and/or brand meaning associated with the customer. Success in establishing a brand meaning is crucial, acting as a significant mediator between brand experience and the customer brand relationship (Sahin, Zeir, and Kitapa, 2011). This element is perceived as essential, providing businesses with a competitive advantage by fostering a robust bond between the customer and the brand (Bowden, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Customer Experience Management and Customer Retention

Capturing a customer through an enriching experience adds dimensions, sensations, and a distinct identity to a brand. Contrarily, Saba (2014) contends that customer experience management strategically oversees a customer's interaction with a product or service. While customer relationship management focuses on transaction recording, customer experience management emphasizes building relationships by attending to the customer's experience with the firm. Therefore, effective management of customer emotions is crucial for gaining and retaining customers, influencing an organization's growth and survival (Shaw, 2007; Lilja and Wiklund, 2006). Customer relationship dissolution often stems from intuition, an emotional state, and even after attracting a customer, perceived experiential value or negligence may lead to product dismissal. To retain such customers, organizations must strategically manage customer emotions. Lilja and Wiklund (2006) emphasize that in today's competitive market, having a satisfied customer is insufficient; strong loyalty is achieved through a higher degree of customer satisfaction.

Therefore, we hypothesize: *Ho1: Customer experience management has no significant effect on Customer Retention in the Indian telecommunications industry.*

Service Quality and Customer Retention

Service quality has garnered significant attention from researchers, managers, and practitioners. Numerous studies indicate a direct correlation between service quality and customer behavioral intentions and retention (Oliver, 1980; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982; Ennew and Binks, 1996; Ranaweera and Neely, 2003; Venelis and Ghauri, 2004). In the context of knowledge-intensive service businesses, reliable methods for measurement, assessment, and improvement are crucial. Many service organizations have implemented customer loyalty programs as part of relationship development.

Therefore, we posit: *Ho2: Customer service quality has no significant effect on Customer Retention in the Indian Telecommunications Industry.*

Customer Brand Relationship and Customer Retention

The development of a customer brand relationship over time is rooted in customers' previous experiences with a brand (Bowden, 2009). The brand serves as a mechanism that engages both the buyer and the seller, intending to forge a long-term customer-brand relationship, often referred to as the relationship builder. This relationship hinges on the success of establishing a brand meaning, a crucial mediator between brand experience and the customer brand relationship (Sahin, Zeir, and Kitapa, 2011). Recognizing its perceived role in providing a competitive advantage by creating a strong bond between the customer and the brand (Bowden, 2009),

we hypothesize: *Ho3: Customer Brand Relationship has no significant effect on customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry.*

Methodology:

This study used a cross-sectional survey design to examine a diverse segment of the population at a specific moment, focusing on public opinion about experiential marketing and customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry. The stratified sampling technique ensured representation from every element in each population category.

With a sample size of 402 determined using the Yaro Yemen model, data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed in person by the researcher and assistants. The questionnaires were promptly collected on-site to avoid delays. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using the Cronbach alpha method, ensuring a reliability coefficient exceeding 0.60. The generated data were then analyzed using correlation and regression analysis techniques.

THE RESULTS Table 2: Regression analysis for customer experience management and customer retention

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015 Dependent Variable: Customer Retention (CR) From table 2 above, results from the regression analysis indicated that customer experience management exhibited a significant positive effect on Customer Retention ($\beta = .444, 0.01$). Also, the critical value established 0.05 (5%) is greater than the calculated (.000) level of significance ($0.000 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate is accepted implying that there is a significant positive relationship between customer experience management and customer retention.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	5.631	.698		8.068	.000
Customer Experience Management (CEM)	.310	.035	.444	8.960	.000

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015 Dependent Variable: Customer Retention (CR)

From table 2 above, results from the regression analysis indicated that customer experience management exhibited a significant positive effect on Customer Retention ($\beta = .444, 0.01$). Also, the critical value established 0.05 (5%) is greater than the calculated (.000) level of significance ($0.000 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate is accepted implying that there is a significant positive relationship between customer experience management and customer retention.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R square	Adjusted square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.444 ^a	.197	.195		1.922

Table 3 reveals the extent to which customer experience management accounted for the change in customer retention indicated by adjusted R-Square, which shows that 19.5% (.195) of the change in customer retention is brought about by customer experience management.

Table 4: Regression analysis for customer service quality and customer retention.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	5.938	.633		9.382	.000
Customer Service Quality (CSQ)	.370	.039	.462	9.408	.000

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015 Dependent Variable: Customer Retention (CR)

From table 4 above, results from the regression analysis indicated that customer service quality exhibited a significant positive effect on Customer Retention ($\beta = .462, 0.01$). Also, the critical value established 0.05 (5%) is greater than the calculated (.000) level of significance ($0.000 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate is accepted implying that there is a significant positive relationship between customer service quality and customer retention.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R square	Adjusted square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.462 ^a	.213	.211		1.903

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015

Table 5 reveals the extent to which customer service quality accounted for the change in customer retention indicated by adjusted R-Square, which shows that 21.1% (.211) of the change in customer retention is brought about by customer service quality.

Table 6: Regression analysis for customer-brand relationship and customer retention.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	6.519	.766		8.509	.000
Customer Brand Relationship Management (CBR)	.249	.039	.334	6.402	.000

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015 Dependent Variable: Customer Retention (CR)

From table 6 above, results from the regression analysis indicated that customer brand relationship exhibited a significant positive effect on Customer Retention ($\beta = .334, 0.01$). Also, the critical value established 0.05 (5%) is greater than the calculated (.000) level of significance ($0.000 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected while the alternate is accepted implying that there is a significant positive relationship between customer-brand relationship and customer retention.

Table 7: Model Summary

Model	R	R square	Adjusted square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.334 ^a	.111	.109		2.076

Source: Analysis of field survey, 2015 Customer Experience Management and Customer Retention

The result obtained from table 2 portrayed an extremely positive correlation coefficient values among the items that measure customer experience management and this points out to the fact that they will all appropriate measures of customer experience management. From table 4.9, the β value ($\beta = .444, 0.01$) indicated that customer experience management has a positive effect on customer retention. Table 4.10 shows the extent to which customer experience management accounted for the change in customer retention that is .195 (19.5%) represents the adjusted R².

Similarly, the result of the hypothesis tested in table 4.18 revealed that there is a significant relationship between customer experience management and customer retention. The implication is that customer Experience management can influence customer retention since customers have a higher degree of satisfaction due to the

attractive environment, quality products, product accessibility, and efficient supply chain. This implies that efficient experience management created by a beautiful, serene, and pleasant retail environment by telecommunication companies can improve product quality and well as brand love. Also in building an efficient experience for customers, telecommunication companies can improve the efficient supply of chairs, location, product accessibility, and affordable pricing. This finding is confirmed by the works of Saba (2014), Lilza and Wiklund (2006), and Robertson and Wilson (2008). According to Robertson and Wilson (2008), customer experience management is a brand-strengthening strategy that encourages customer retention when it is presented creatively and critically since it evokes emotions which have a long-lasting effect on customers.

Customer Service Quality and Customer Retention From the analysis of data in table 5, an overwhelmingly positive correlation was observed among the variables of customer service quality. The overwhelming positive correlations suggest that they were all appropriate indicators of customer service quality. Table 6 showed that the β value ($\beta = .462, 0.01$) has a positive effect on customer service quality and customer retention. In table 6, R2 reported that 21.1% (.211) of the change in customer retention is explained by customer service quality. The result of the hypothesis tested in table 5 reported that there is a significant relationship between customer service quality and customer retention. The implication of this is that customer service quality can influence the instruments of exerting customer retention if customers put an important value on it. This can be achieved through the provision of reliable service, prompt responsiveness to customer complaints, and a higher level of customer empathy. This is in line with the work of Robertson and Wilson (2008) who affirmed that connections are in the form of experiences that are personally relevant, memorable, interactive and emotional. According to Robertson and Wilson (2008), experiential marketing is a brand strengthening strategy. How it is presented creativity is critical, since it needs to be immediately understood and relevant to the customer to have an impact. When used effectively and across channels, it can be awfully powerful, since experiential marketing can create memorable, relevant and often valuable experiences. Engaging a customer through an experience is a way of giving dimension, feel and smell to a brand. It can generate strong feelings that the customer takes away and internalizes for years to come (Schmitt, 1999). Schmitt (1999) argued that customers respond to two main components of their service encounters (i.e. personal interaction encounters and physical environment encounters). These encounters are reflected by four dimensions of experiential value: efficiency, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness. The efficiency value reflects the utilitarian aspects of shopping and describes active investment in economic, temporal, behavioural and psychological resources that may result in a positive return (Schmitt, 2003). Battarabee and Koskinen (2005) argued that the perceived aesthetic value is a reaction to the consonance and unity of a physical object, cadency, or performance in retailing telecom products. For example, aesthetics can be captured in relevant visual elements of the retail environment (Mathwick, Malthora, and Rigdon 2001). It is noteworthy that, visual appeal is often provoked by the design and physical attractiveness of the shopping environment, while the entertainment dimension of the aesthetic response results from an understanding or appreciation of the retail display.

Customer Brand Relationship and Customer Retention From the analysis of data in table 4.14, an overwhelmingly positive correlation was observed among the variables of the customer-brand relationship. The overwhelming positive correlations suggest that they were all appropriate indicators of customer-brand relationships. Table 4.15 showed that the β value ($\beta = .334, 0.01$) has a positive effect on customer s brand relationships and customer retention. In table 4.16, R2 reported that 10.9% (.109) of the change in customer retention is explained by customer-brand relationships. The result of the hypothesis tested in table 4.20 reported that there is a significant relationship between customer-brand relationship and customer retention. These results imply that developing an appropriate customer-brand relationship strategy will improve the degree to which customers are retained in the telecommunication industry because the customer will see the brand as a part of their existence and belonging, and not just as a product of the company. As it were, the customers will be at one with the product. This can be done by introducing brand experience, brand trust, brand communication, and brand targeting. When customers have these feelings, their capacity of being retained improves over time. The result affirms the conclusions of Groonos (2000), Lehtinen and Lehtinen (2010), and Caruana (2002). Groonos describes quality as consisting of three dimensions for which mental and behavioural domains are eminent behaviour describes feeling, emotions, intellect, and psychological frame of mind which are key elements in experiential marketing strategy.

Telecommunication service provisions are expected to tap into the emotional appeal of the service provided by them to foster customer loyalty through repeat purchases. Spohrer and Maglio (2008) opined that customer services are increasingly becoming a longer portion of most organisations' regional, national, and global positioning strategy by creating atmosphere and strategic appeal. They opine that today's knowledge-intensive services businesses require reliable methods of measurement, assessment, and improvement in order to improve the quality-of-service delivery.

FINDINGS OF STUDY

In summary, the data analysis indicated a robust and favorable impact of experience marketing on customer retention in the Indian telecommunications industry. More specifically, the research findings revealed that:

- i. Customer experience management showed statistical significance in explaining customer retention in the Indian Telecommunications Industry.
- ii. Customer service quality demonstrated statistical significance in explaining customer retention in the Indian Telecommunications Industry.
- iii. Customer brand relationship exhibited statistical significance in explaining customer retention in the Indian Telecommunications Industry.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the study provides evidence supporting the idea that Experience Marketing significantly influences Customer Retention in India's telecommunications industry. The key findings highlight that Customer Service Quality, Customer Brand Relationship, and Customer Emotional Experience are crucial aspects of Experience Marketing, contributing to enhanced customer retention in Indian Telecommunication Firms. Specifically:

1. Customer Experience Management, as part of Experience Marketing, positively impacts customer retention in the Indian Telecommunication industry. This is crucial for evaluating customer experiences during calls, browsing, chatting, and social engagement.
2. Customer Service Quality, a key element of Experience Marketing, significantly and positively affects customer retention. It offers users a wide range of network choices based on the delivery of quality services, contributing to a competitive advantage.
3. Customer Brand Relationship, as a dimension of Experience Marketing, positively influences customer retention. It serves as an effective tool for building Brand trust, facilitating Brand Communication, and targeting the Brand effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Given the dynamic Indian business landscape influenced by technological advancements and the rapid growth of the telecommunications sector, there is a strong call for a resurgence of customer experience management as a strategic imperative. Marketing managers in the industry are urged to embrace customer experience management visibly to counter the current recessionary growth in the telecommunications sector.
2. Telecommunication operators in India should transition from traditional marketing approaches to an experience-based marketing strategy to maintain relevance and competitiveness globally. Incorporating consumer buying experiences into the product development process is essential for customer retention. Aligning standard marketing practices with a focus on excellent customer retention performance, including planning, budgeting, and accountability, will be integral.
3. Enhancing customer retention can be achieved by promptly, efficiently, and justifiably addressing customer complaints. It is recommended that telecommunication operators establish, implement, and

maintain a well-documented strategic complaint handling process. This process should prioritize a positive customer experience, fostering a sense of belonging that contributes to customer retention. Implementing a customer-focused, visible, accountable, objective, trackable, and continually improving process, leading to closure, is crucial. Building rewarding and engaging interactions between companies and customers can be achieved through the active involvement of organizational leaders and customers, emphasizing value for money, timely delivery of promises, and enhancing employee customer and brand awareness through effective training.

4. Recognizing that customer service delivery is at the core of customer retention, managers and marketers should strategically identify the needs, wants, and desires of customers in the Indian telecommunications industry. Developing service delivery strategies aligned with these identified needs is critical, given the positive and significant impact of customer service delivery on customer retention (as per Hypothesis Two). A high perception of service delivery by customers in the telecommunications industry in India corresponds to a higher capacity for retention.

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