



**MARKETING IN PANDEMIC: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SMALL
BUSINESSES IN COVID-19 AND LESSONS LEARNED**

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of Nigerian small businesses in marketing their goods at the peak of COVID-19 and the lessons learned. The sample consisted of 21 marketers selling in an open street market in Southeast Nigeria. An ethnographic approach was used to gather data from the perspective of the cultural insider. Concerning the experiences of the marketers at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, data analysis revealed four categories that included communication, social responsibility, distribution, ethics, and purchasing. For the lessons learned, five categories also emerged, namely: Market intelligence, succession planning, digitalization of communication and distribution, and resources. Findings suggest that small businesses need to make the improvements they need to succeed in their marketing roles. Business educators, consultants, and small business coordinating organizations should provide Educational programmes to equip small business marketers with the competencies they need to survive the pandemic and cope with the new normal.

Keywords: Marketing, COVID-19, Ethnography, Micro Business, Small and Medium Enterprises

Introduction

Globally, small businesses are experiencing a hard time due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). The World Health Organization, WHO (2020), describes COVID-19 as an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 Virus. The disease mainly causes headache, fever, sore throat, cough, acute respiratory distress syndrome, acute cardiac injury, upper airway congestion, pharyngalgia, myalgia, diarrhea, and anemia among others (Chen et al, 2019). COVID-19 is easily transmissible from human to human through daily unhygienic activities like close contact, coughing, and sneezing (Lin et al, 2020; Wu et al, 2020; European Medicines Agency, 2023). The virus was first identified in Wuhan, China, in 2019 (Perlman, 2020) and was declared a pandemic in 2020, after it spread to many countries in the world. The disease has the main features of a pandemic, including high rates of attack, infectiousness, severity, and contagiousness (Noor and Maniha, 2020; Morens, Folkers, and Fauci, 2009; Kelly, 2011; Cascella et al, 2023). Unfortunately, as of April 4, 2020, there were 1,051,697 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 56,986 deaths (WHO, 2020).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic came as a surprise to many, it is not a completely novel challenge. Similar pandemics such as the Russian flu (1888), Spanish flu (1918), and Asian flu



(1956) had occurred in the past and claimed millions of lives (Noor and Maniha, 2020; Kępińska, 2020; US Food and Drug Administration, 2023). However, for many micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Nigeria, COVID-19 is their first experience of a pandemic. Unfortunately, Reports on the impact of COVID-19 indicate that small businesses have been the worst hit by the virus (ILO, 2020; Andersson et al, 2023). In addition, A survey of 10,000 small business owners by Goldman Sachs (2020) found that 96 percent of small businesses were negatively impacted by the coronavirus, while 51 percent reported that their businesses could not survive 3 months of an economic shutdown. Micro enterprises in Nigeria are those with less than 10 employees, a total asset of less than ₦5 million (excluding land and buildings) and operated by sole proprietors while small and medium enterprises are entities with asset base of ₦5 million and not more than ₦500 million (excluding land and buildings) with employees of between 11 and 200 (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2014).

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, many nations resorted to lockdowns, including the closure of borders. Businesses that did not provide essential products were completely closed, while those that provided essential products were open but had limited operations - less access to goods/raw materials, and little or no physical contact with their customers, who were advised or instructed to sit at home. These events had remarkable consequences for various business functions. However, their consequences for the marketing function were more tremendous given that marketing is the function that interfaces with customers, requiring some personnel to be in the field. COVID-19 caused significant changes to the key drivers of consumer behaviour. The disease, along with preventive measures adopted in many countries, rendered many consumer behavioural patterns obsolete and therefore changed the way marketing could be successfully conducted. Marketing, which typically involves the creation, communication, and distribution of values as well as the establishment and maintenance of strong customer relationships (Kotler and Keller, 2016), required new strategies and skills at the peak of the pandemic. Small business owners who meaningfully connected with their customer base, developed stronger community ties, improved their own skill sets, and innovated their business models emerged stronger than ever before (Liguori and Pittz, 2020).

Given the need to help marketing personnel navigate the turbulence caused by COVID-19, scholars were attracted to studying how COVID-19 impacted marketing in business organisations. Thus, early studies were devoted to the impact of the pandemic on marketing, but most of the studies were conceptual (for example, He and Harris, 2020; Czifra and Molnár, 2020; and Liguori and Pittz, 2020). While these early studies provided the much-needed quick support to marketing practitioners and researchers, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how marketing was conducted as well as the lessons learned to guide future decisions. These important insights can best be obtained by studying the situation as an insider. Thus, this study is an ethnographic research that explores 1) the lived marketing experiences of small businesses in COVID-19; and 2) lessons learned from marketing during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Context

This study was conducted in a street market located in Enugu, the South East region of Nigeria. The market lies on a street of approximately 0.5 kilometers and offers mainly essential products such as groceries, unpacked foodstuffs, household items, personal care, and healthcare products. There were 62 shops/kiosks in the market at the time of this study. Most of the



businesses located in the market were micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Given that MSMEs in Nigeria were already facing challenges of poor funding and low managerial skills, their abilities to withstand the challenges of the pandemic were limited. Buying and selling were going on in the market from 7 am to 8 pm every day throughout the period of the lockdown. Moreover, in most parts of Nigeria, people needed to go out and buy essential items for themselves and their households. This allowed the author to conduct this study. Twenty-three (23) participants were initially recruited for the study, but only 21 stayed with the project to the end.

This study is important because it contributes to the body of knowledge in marketing in small businesses during the pandemic and therefore, makes significant novel contributions. First, it provides a firsthand account of real experiences and the practice of marketing in pandemics. The study also explores the lessons learned, which will be useful in making decisions in the future. Overall, the study provides rich information that could inform further research, marketing strategies, and policies for various audiences, including marketing personnel, business owners, scholars, and business educators in similar locations. The future dimension in this study is important because as long as international travel, globalization, and migration continue to increase, pandemics will keep reoccurring (Madhav et al, 2017).

Marketing and Pandemics

In pandemics, economic activities are disrupted as the global economy and financial markets are severely affected. The COVID-19 and its mitigation measures disrupted transportation and distribution systems and caused huge reductions in income and a sharp rise in unemployment in almost all countries of the world. ILO (2020) reported that about 2.7 billion workers, representing about 81% of the world's workforce, were negatively affected by the pandemic, while the income of many self-employed workers collapsed as of April 2020. Besides the economic shocks and catastrophic losses that threatened the existence of businesses, many lives were lost, which led to deeper emotional pain for individuals, families, and communities. All together, these make production and marketing of goods difficult and alter the entire market and customer landscape – behaviours, needs, and priorities (McKibbon and Sidorenko, 2006).

Consumers' needs and wants shifted from social products like apparel towards essential products, especially food, dietary supplements, and medications that can help prevent or cure the disease in question. Shifts in customer wants and needs towards these essential products or the intention to shift were reported in many countries (GAIN, 2020, and Kats, 2020; McKinsey and Company, 2020). Other data sources show that infotainment and games, which keep customers busy at home, also increased in demand. For example, Hoekstra and Leeftang (2020) state that Netflix attracted about 16 million new subscribers between April and June 2020 and that games and puzzles were increasingly popular as the board game - Trekking the World - generated revenues of about \$100,000 in one week. In addition, behaviours such as less frequent purchases, bulk buying, and panic buying are common (Whitten 2020). Besides the customer landscape, regulations are also changing with new rules (such as the sit-at-home order aimed at reducing the spread and impact of the pandemic).



These sudden and uncomfortable changes were opportunities in disguise, which required marketers to be agile, flexible, and discerning. Marketers who understood this changed their marketing goals and ideologies in line with the events in the market and altered their marketing practices across the entire marketing value chain - from production through communication and distribution to customer relationship management. Formulating new marketing goals and strategies is critical for the survival of businesses in the pandemic. As Rumelt (2008) avers:

“There is nothing like a crisis to clarify the mind. In suddenly volatile and different times, you must have a strategy. By strategy, I mean a cohesive response to a challenge. A real strategy is neither a document nor a forecast but rather an overall approach based on a diagnosis of a challenge. The most important element of a strategy is a coherent viewpoint about the forces at work, not a plan.”

A popular tool for formulating effective and holistic marketing strategies is the 7Ps framework. The 7Ps (product, price, place, promotion, people, process, physical evidence), known as "marketing mix," are critical variables of marketing that are normally used as a framework to develop marketing strategies. Marketing mix has been recognized as a set of factors that a firm can control to satisfy customers and obtain the desired response from them (McCarthy and Perreault in Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995; Kotler and Armstrong, 2019). The concept of marketing mix was first used by Neil Borden in 1953 (Wolf and Crots, 2011) and popularized by McCarthy, who suggested that the four Ps (product, price, place, and promotion) are the primary ingredients of marketing strategy (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1995). Booms and Bitner added three more Ps (People, Process, and Physical Evidence) with a view to addressing the challenges of marketing services (Booms and Bitner, 1982).

Applying the 7Ps framework in developing marketing strategies in the pandemic means that firms examine the changes that have occurred (and are likely to occur) in the business environment and ask pertinent questions (what and how) about each P in the framework. For example, what are the products that consumers now need, and how can we manufacture or offer the essential products? What prices are consumers willing to pay for these essential goods, and how can we offer goods within the acceptable price range? Where are the customers now, and how can we get our products across to those places? What media have become popular for promotion, and how can we use the media to promote goods and services? What are the skills required for successful marketing at this time, and how can we equip our people with the skills to take up the new challenge? Applying the framework enables firms to ensure that no main variable has been overlooked in their strategy formulation.

Methodology

Design

Ethnographic design was used in this study. Ethnography is an important design in marketing research that offers exclusive, investigative, and organic contributions. This design helps to gather data from the perspective of a cultural insider (Magilvy et al, 1987; Muecke, 1992; McIlroy and Storebeck, 2011) and enables researchers to collect valid and reliable data through the development of close and continuing contact with those being studied (Gold, 1997). The design is also useful in gaining insights into patterns of behavior and for predicting future trends (Pearson, Sytiva, and Hart, 2013). Given the foregoing, this design is appropriate for this study,



which explores the lived experiences and lessons learned of 21 marketing personnel in small businesses operating in a market during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria.

Participants were given two free listing tasks. They were asked to list the noticeable changes in consumer behavior since the COVID-19 lockdown. They were also asked to list the important skills for successful marketing in the COVID-19 era. Ethnographic semi-structured interviews and informal interviews were used to collect data during observations. An ethnographic semi-structured interview was used because it is appropriate in studies that are multifaceted and sensitive (Chattergee and Kumar, 1999). The semi-structured interview allowed for detailed exploration of the issues (Britten, 1995) from the points of view of the study subjects (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Thus, it allows the researcher to understand the society for what it is rather than impose their views (or views of other professionals) on the data collection process (Weber in Gold, 1997). In addition, COVID-19 is a relatively new phenomenon. Exploratory approaches are considered appropriate for under-researched areas to provide direction for future intervention studies (Hair, Wolfinbarger, Otinau, and Bush, 2010; Medical Research Council [MRC], 2013; Kanu, 2020; Kanu and Ojo, 2021).

In implementing the design, the researchers were actively involved in helping the small businesses implement or review their marketing strategies. Getting into the marketing activities of the businesses and participating in the process rather than merely observing helped the author to develop personal connections and cordial relationships with the participants, which made it easy for the author to interact with participants and access rich data. Interactions were done face-to-face and virtually on mobile phones and social media (WhatsApp).

Participants

The 83 salespersons doing business in the 62 shops/kiosks operating in the market were observed during the study. However, only 21 participated fully in the study and responded to surveys. All the participants consented to sharing their experiences and lessons learned with the researchers. Before the recorded interview sessions, each participant completed a detailed personal information form, which included a description of themselves and their businesses. See Table 1 for participants' descriptions.

Procedure

In each of the 21 businesses, the person responsible for marketing the products offered by the business was recruited to participate in the study. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the managers of the businesses (in situations where the managers were not participants in the study). Data gathering on the experiences of the marketers was done through direct observations conducted for a total of 230 hours between 10.00 am and 5 pm from April 2020 to March 2021. Observations lasted 1 to 3 hours at a time, depending on the availability of the author. The sit-at-home order in Nigeria at the time of this study limited the period of observation. Data gathering on the lessons learned was collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews between March 2021 and January 2022.

In addition, the participants completed an 8-item demographic survey and created a list of answers to two questions (freelisting). Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were clustered into two distinct thematic categories. The first section of the interview explored each participant's marketing experiences during COVID-19. The



second section invited participants to narrate lessons they learnt as well as steps they would take in the future to improve performance in pandemics. Thus, participants had an opportunity to reflectively describe and discuss how their experiences would inform their preparations for uncertainties in the future. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. Extensive field notes were kept of observations and interviews, and the responses were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were either filmed or taped, depending on what the participant allowed. The participants were assigned pseudo initials to protect their identity.

Analysis

The data gathered by freelisting was analysed. The frequency of responses across lists and the sum rank of responses across all lists were determined and used to calculate cultural salience for the freelisting data. Cultural salience (S) was calculated as $S = F^2/(N(\sum R))$. Salience is relative (Quinlan, 2005), and determining which items are salient is not standardized (Quinlan, 2019). Therefore, while there is no drawn boundary in this study for stating that an item is not important, based on the recommendations of Benard (2011), only items mentioned by 10% or more of participants in this study are considered salient.

Interview data were analysed using thematic and critical discourse analysis. At the beginning, the data were organized into categories through the use of the discourse thematic content analysis method. This involved coding the texts into thematic categories based on content (Leedy and Ormond, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Following this stage, a Critical Discourse Analysis method was applied in listening/watching the interview text again (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Janks, 1999). The purpose was also to analyse non-verbal communication and uncover the social context, hidden power relations, and ideologies embedded in the narratives provided by the participants (Mengibar, 2015).

Ethics and Rigour

The research goals and objectives were presented to all participants at the point of recruitment, and their consent was gained before the study. Participants agreed that pseudonyms should be used instead of real names or real initials. Each participant chose a pseudo-initial while the author ensured that every initial was unique. The author examined the research proposal with each participant. All participants (and the author) agreed that if the study is conducted as proposed, there will be no opportunity for exploiting or harming any participant in the research process.

To ensure credibility, the author checked with each participant after their interviews to find out if they were satisfied with their responses or if they needed to add or remove anything in their narratives. In addition, participants were shown the interpretation of their narratives and the categories where they had been placed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to confirm if they were appropriately positioned

Results

Sample

The survey and structured interview sample included 21 marketing personnel, and the population observed during the 77 observation periods included 56 salespersons selling in the



Street market located in South-Eastern Nigeria. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 60 years. A majority of the participants were female (n = 13). In addition, a majority have had training in business/entrepreneurship (n = 14). Participants provided information about their educational level, type of business, and position in the business (see Table 1)

Table 1: Self-described profile of the participants

Name	Gend	Age	Educati R a n g e (Y r s)	Type o n L e v e l	of Busin ess	Business A g e (y rs)	Position	Business T r a i n i n g
1	A	Male	25-40	B.Sc	Supermarket	4	Owner Man ager	Yes
2	B	Fema	25-40	O'Leve l	Grocery Kiosk	2	Sales person	No
3	N	Male	25-40	B.Sc	Chemist	7	Manager	Yes
4	N	Fema	41-50	M.Sc	Grocery Kiosk	4	Owner Man ager	Yes
5	CJ	Male	25-40	B.Sc	Food stuff	2	Owner Man ager	Yes
6	M	Fema	Below 25	BSc	Chemist	2	Sales person	Yes
7	FD	Male	40-60	B.Sc	Animal Feed	5	Owner Man ager	Yes
8	IJ	Fema	25-40	O'Leve l	Food stuff	3	Owner Man ager	Yes
9	C	Fema	Below 25	OND	Animal feed	6	Sales person	Yes
10	M	Fema	40-60	B.Sc	Supermarket	4	Owner Man ager	No



11	CI	Fema	40-60	OND	Supermarket	4	Owner	Yes
							Man ager	
12	D	Male	40-60	M.Sc	Grocery Kiosk	6	Owner	Yes
							Man ager	
13	JB	Male	25 -40	O'Leve 1	Food stuff	2	Owner	No
							Man ager	
14	EN	Male	Below 2 5	O'Leve 1	Animal feed	5	Manager	Yes
15	FB	Fema	25-40	M.Sc	Supermarket	6	Owner	Yes
							man ager	
16	K	Fema	25-40	O'Leve 1	Grocery	3	Owner	No
							Man ager	
17	FS	Fema	Below 2 5	O'Leve 1	Food stuff	4	Manager	No
18	IK	Fema	Below 2 5	B.Sc	Food stuff	2	Salesperson	No
19	EL	Male	Below 2 5	O'Leve 1	Grocery	2	Owner	Yes
							man ager	
20	M	Fema	25-40	O'Leve 1	Super market	3	Owner	Yes
							man ager	
21	EN	Fema	41-60	B.Sc	Supermarket	1	Salesperson	No

Analysis of freelisting data (Table 2) shows that participants listed bulk buying, infrequent purchases, shift towards essential products, panic buying, choosing of healthier alternatives, increased haggling, and buying on credit as important changes in consumer behavior in the COVID-19 Lockdown. Participants also mentioned impatience and a request for home delivery as part of the changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, given that they were not mentioned by up to ten percent of the participants, they are not considered culturally salient. Table 3 shows that Creativity and innovation, social media marketing, customer data management, market intelligence, collaboration, problem solving, e-commerce, and adaptability are some of the very important skills for successful marketing in the COVID-19 lockdown. Other skills listed were decision-making, empathy, interpersonal skills, and financial management. Since product packaging and inventory management were not mentioned by up to 10% of the participants, they are not considered culturally salient.



Table 2: Free listing responses on change in consumer behavior in the COVID-19 era

What are the noticeable changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-19 Lockdown?

Responses	F	$\sum R$	N	S (Salience)
1 Bulk buying	15	19	21	0.5639
2 Infrequent purchases	16	22	21	0.5541
3 Shift towards essential products	19	36	21	0.4775
4 Panic buying	9	10	21	0.3857
5 Choosing healthier alternatives	9	24	21	0.1607
6 Increased haggling	7	20	21	0.1166
7 Buying on Credit	5	32	21	0.0372
8 Impatience	2	8	21	0.0238
9 Request for home delivery	1	6	21	0.0079

Notes: Responses are listed in order of salience, highest to lowest. F = frequency of response across all lists, $\sum R$ = sum rank of the responses over all lists. N = total number of all respondents. $S = F^2/(N(\sum R))$.

Table 3: Free listing responses on skills for successful marketing in the COVID-19 lockdown

What are the skills for successful marketing in the COVID-19 era?

Response	F	$\sum R$	N	S (Salience)
1 Creativity and innovation	19	18	21	0.9550
2 Social media marketing	16	15	21	0.8126
3 Customer data management	16	17	21	0.7170
4 Market intelligence	17	20	21	0.6880
5 Collaboration	14	20	21	0.4666
6 Problem solving	12	16	21	0.4285
7 E-commerce	12	18	21	0.3809
8 Adaptability	10	16	21	0.2976
9 Decision making	7	14	21	0.1666
10 Empathy	4	9	21	0.0846
11 Interpersonal skills	3	7	21	0.0612
12 Financial management	3	12	21	0.0357
13 Product packaging	2	3	21	0.0634
14 Inventory management	2	4	21	0.0476

Notes: Responses are listed in order of salience, highest to lowest. F = frequency of responses across all lists, $\sum R$ = sum rank of the responses over all lists. N = total number of all respondents. $S = F^2/(N(\sum R))$.

Lived Marketing Experiences of Small Businesses in the COVID-19 Era

Participants' narratives uncovered their experiences as well as their challenges and concerns. Thematic analysis of the contents revealed five dominant themes, including communication, social responsibility, distribution, ethics, and purchasing.



Communication

Some participants (n=7) reported that they reached out to customers who were staying home during the lockdown through phone calls, SMS, and WhatsApp. Sending solidarity messages and checking on customers elicited different responses– happiness, surprise, and irritation. However, irrespective of the responses they received, three participants said that reaching out to customers made them feel responsible. As one participant expressed,

ND: Usually, I don't call my customers if we don't have any serious business together, but the COVID-19 lockdown is different. I have called some customers to check on them, some were surprised, and some were very happy, depending on the relationship, I think. In any case, I feel satisfied that I have done what I was supposed to do.

FB: I thought it was a time to show solidarity... but some customers were not comfortable with my calls, a customer was wondering why I called ...and I simply told her I was just checking up. She said, "Okay, thank you," but I could tell from her voice that she wasn't happy.

Meanwhile, some participants (n=2) found it odd to call a customer for reasons other than business, while some (n=8) reported that they wanted to reach out to their customers but didn't have their contact information.

BO: ...it's odd to call a customer, just to greet"

JB: I wanted to reach out to my customers, but I didn't have their contact information. I feel bad because I lost touch with some of them who are staying at home

A participant said she did not have contact information for her customer, but started gathering it immediately after the lockdown was announced.

MB: We didn't keep a customer database before COVID-19, but we started building one immediately lockdown was announced, so we were able to catch some old customers and get their contacts before the lockdown became serious. That helped me stay connected with some old and new customers.

Participants (n=6) narrated how they changed their communication to conform to the COVID situation. Some reported that they included COVID-related images in their business premises to help customers stay safe.

EN: We simply added 'stay safe' to our customer goodbye greetings ... Then we pasted images of someone wearing a face mask, and also someone washing hands on the walls, and also made social distancing marks on the floor of our store. It made customers feel that we care about their safety, and even though some customers did not respect the social distancing order, they knew we were responsible.

CI: When we sell products, we explain to the customer how that product can help the customer prevent or cure COVID (if any) or how they can get the most benefits out of the product. By so doing, we had sales increase for some personal and healthcare products.

Social Responsibility

Four participants reported that they partnered with politicians to donate palliatives.

MO: I shifted my marketing efforts from individual consumers to politicians and religious organizations that were sharing food items with the less privileged. I was



happy to be part of the process of helping the needy, and I also made a lot of sales as I supplied food items to 10 politicians and 8 churches at a little profit.

A few participants (n=4) narrated how they helped customers who were in economic difficulties during the lockdown and how they benefited from rendering such assistance.

CJ: When loyal customers come around and I see they can't afford their necessities, I just let them go with those things at a price they were able to pay, especially if they are things that we harvest from our farms. It strengthened my relationship with the customers.

BO: Some customers ask to buy my goods on credit and promise to pay on a particular day, but the days will pass, and many won't pay. Some of them eventually paid, but some are yet to pay. ...and I know I am going to have some bad debts, but I am glad those customers are committed to my business ...I've gotten lots of referrals from those customers.

Three respondents mentioned that spreading information about how to stay safe from coronavirus made their businesses appear responsible.

ND: I educated people on the need to and how to stay safe from the virus. I printed some flyers, and I also got some from other sources. ...when I gave them to customers and spoke to them about the virus, they were comfortable, seeing us as careful salespersons and trusting our service more.

Distribution

Many participants (n=12) said that a lack of e-commerce skills, digital platforms, and technologies made it difficult to sell goods to customers through digital media and technology.

JB: I've been told that I can post and sell my goods on WhatsApp and other platforms, but I don't have an Android phone, and I don't even know how to operate it. When I ask them here to teach me, they are not very open to teaching.

However, two participants reported that they learnt and started using social media after the lockdown was announced, while three participants said they used other people's social media handles to sell their products.

CA: I had to learn how to use WhatsApp status to sell my product, and it worked extremely well because I got a lot of orders from my contacts and referrals, too.

DD: I do not have social media skills, but I asked my daughter to use her social media handles to sell. It was amazing because she understood it and had a lot of followers.

Three participants reported that even when they offered to deliver the goods to customers' houses, some customers were not comfortable with the idea.

IK: If you are a small local business, you have to be close with a customer to be able to deliver edibles like vegetables to that customer's house. Some customers were not comfortable when I said I could deliver food stuff to their homes; they preferred to come to the market to get them, so they just asked me to get the items ready for collection.

EL: When I offered to deliver some goods at home to a customer, the customer openly told me, "I don't want a relationship beyond customer relationship."

Ethics

Respondents reported that customers perceived the enforcement of COVID rules, such as social distancing, hand washing, and wearing of face masks, differently. While some found it annoying (n=7), some found it safe.



BO: When we asked some customers to wear their face masks or wash their hands, they got angry. Some will even ask you: Do you think I have COVID?"

MM: Some customers didn't like those COVID rules, like wearing face masks and washing hands ...and we found that customers did not like to wash their hands when the hand washing facilities are below standard, like where there is no running water or where the water is not clean. One customer said, "I don't want to get coronavirus from washing my hands here."

IK: Some customers don't like to wear the face masks at all or to wear them correctly, but if I wear my own and sanitise my hands before attending to them, they will be very comfortable. So we always wear our own to make customers comfortable. Sometimes we insist that customers should comply, and we have a set of customers who like our shop because we always insist.

Concerning pricing, respondents reported that they hiked prices to make a profit and to be able to repurchase goods. However, a few participants reported that they had to reduce prices for some classes of customers to help them cope with the pandemic. Participants narrated as follows:

MO: We increased prices to be able to make profit and also to be able to buy the products again when the goods finish...some products are scarce and cost of transportation has increased so if one is not careful, one will not be able to buy goods again after selling the one that is available now.

IJ... We didn't increase the prices of goods. Some customers cannot afford the normal prices, let alone the hiked prices. We even reduce the prices sometimes to help customers afford.

Purchasing

Participants (n=14) reported a hard time with purchasing during the lockdown. Specifically, they experienced scarcity of goods and higher cost of goods and higher cost transportation.

FS: Wholesalers used to bring goods to our shops, but they no longer bring them, so getting goods is currently hard, and when you order, the goods take a long time to come with high prices.

Some participants (n=12) reported that they added new lines to their merchandise due to the COVID situation. Most of what they added were nose masks, face shields, hand sanitisers, and disinfectants. A few participants (n = 3) reported that they integrated cheaper alternatives in order to offer affordable goods to their customers.

CI: We bought and sold a lot of hand sanitizers, disinfectants, and nose masks, and we sold them a lot because people wanted to stay safe or were forced by banks and other organizations to use them.

IJ: We bought more of cheaper goods because the expensive ones were no longer selling well at some point.

Thematic Analysis of the Lessons-Learned

Thematic analysis of the contents revealed five dominant themes, including Market intelligence, Coopetition, Succession planning, Digitalisation of communication and distribution, and Resources.



Market intelligence

Participants (n=7) described how the lockdown came to them as a surprise and emphasized the need to be proactive, to understand what is happening or about to happen, and make necessary preparations

EN: ... we heard that someone coming from abroad brought a disease to Lagos ...and the next thing we heard was that everybody should sit at home.

FB: I was about to travel to buy goods, and all of a sudden, I was told commercial vehicles had stopped working. I didn't see the lockdown coming, and when it came, I didn't see it lasting too long since coronavirus is not strong in Nigeria, but like a joke, the lockdown took a whole year.

NG: We didn't have a chance to prepare ...one needs to follow up certain news and watch the trends of regulations and forecast the direction it's going to take.

Some participants (n=3) also mentioned the need to be adaptable and to face reality.

NG: One needs to be able to make decisions quickly and act fast on survival plans. Right now, I think and implement my plans fast. It's better to face reality. If I fail, I will try another one fast... it is better than doing nothing, and time is passing.

Two participants expressed how they benefited from consulting those who had more knowledge. As one participant expressed:

CA: When lockdown started initially, there was a lot of confusion about the best thing to do. The rules were not clear, and there was so much uncertainty about tomorrow. But at some point, I realized that it is better to consult people who know better to help rather than remain in confusion throughout the lockdown.

Coopetition

Cooperation among small business competitors was reported to be an effective way forward for small businesses to survive COVID-19. Four respondents commented on the need for competitors to collaborate to find solutions that work for all. Although the businesses were already doing this, some participants felt there was a need to do more.

MB: As business owners, we met regularly to analyse how things were changing and how we should also change or navigate the hard times and protect our businesses

EL: There is a lot of competition in this market, but business people need to take it easy; the pandemic era is not a time for competition, but a time to come together and strategise to ensure we all survive the hard times. ...small businesses need to work together during tough times

Succession

Some participants (n=3) narrated experiences relating to succession planning – Situations where an inadequate or no succession plan didn't go well for the businesses.

EL: We lost our Dad recently, and there was no one to take over the business, so I am just trying to do it because this business pays all our school fees, but it's tough because I'm just learning it now.

IK: My mum used to sell here, but she no longer comes out. She has diabetes, and they said she shouldn't come out again because she can easily be infected with coronavirus.



I had to start selling these things; ...but it's not even my kind of thing because I hate to sell these food stuff.

Digitalisation

Several participants reaffirmed the need to keep a customer database and to digitalise communication and distribution. As some participants expressed,

FD: One big lesson from this COVID-19 lockdown is to keep a customer database, even if it's to write the numbers down in a jotter. When almost everything halted all of a sudden, it was hard to reach some important customers. Also, it's important to know how to advertise goods on social media. It's one of my priorities as soon as lockdown is over.

CC: I will buy an Android phone and learn how to use at least WhatsApp. During the lockdown, customers usually said, "send the picture, let me see," but I couldn't ...I had to beg other people to help me send the pictures, and sometimes they don't help me.

Some participants (n=3) narrated how they corrected their mistakes and started doing things right without further delay.

NG: I made a mistake, yes, but I did not allow my mistake to kill my business. I was determined to start correcting them. When I met old customers again anywhere, I collected their numbers and also collected numbers from new customers. I lost some of my customers because I lost touch with them, but I got some new ones, and I am following up with them.

Concerning distribution, participants (n=9) strongly emphasised the need for social media and e-commerce platforms.

MB: During the lockdown, we realized that e-commerce was necessary, and we started building a website gradually. Meanwhile, we explored the option of partnering with established e-commerce platforms like Jumia to sell, and it is working.

IJ: Before the lockdown, I wanted to start selling my food stuff on social media but a friend told me that my products were not packaged so the pictures will not look nice so I dropped the idea then but during the lock down, I started displaying the food stuff on my WhatsApp status without packaging and I sold a lot of goods and get a lot of referrals ...now I know I can sell anything on social media.

Resources

Several participants (n=8) mentioned the need for basic tech devices such as Android or iPhones, or other lessons, and laptops. Besides these work tools, many of the participants (n=12) emphasized the need for appropriate human and financial resources.

MB...every business, no matter how small, should have basic tools and equipment and such as phones; these are basic things, and because they are costly, they are not things you want to buy when there is a downturn.

FD: What I regretted most was that I didn't have any social media handle and no customer contacts.

Participants (n=5) cited the need to have committed and capable human resources. others mentioned financial resources

CC: Myself and my sales boys were all stock; all of us were not IT literate.



EN: Savings is very important. When lockdown was announced, many people here (including myself) didn't have money to stock up on goods, and we were buying goods at exorbitant prices. Also, I think small businesses need to keep a good percentage of their assets liquid. I tried to sell some land to enrich my shop, but I couldn't find anyone to buy the land. It was hard to survive the pandemic.

Discussion

The findings provide a deep understanding of how markets and marketing changed during the lockdown, as well as what small businesses did to increase their chances of survival. Given that pandemics always come along with threats to lives and livelihoods, fear, scarcity and unpredictability, and a reduction in social contact, it was no surprise that participants listed bulk buying, infrequent purchases, shift towards essential products, panic buying, choosing healthier alternatives, increased haggling and buying on credit as some noticeable changes in consumer behavior at the peak of the coronavirus. These findings are in line with GAIN 2020, Kats, 2020, and Whitten, 2020. Some of the findings are obtainable across many countries. For example, McKinsey and Company (2020) surveyed in 45 countries and found that consumers in these countries indicated their intention to shift towards essential products. Marketing in a changing world certainly requires specific skills. Participants listed creativity and innovation, social media marketing, customer data management, market intelligence, collaboration, problem solving, adaptability, decision making, empathy, and interpersonal skills as some of the important skills required for success in the marketing role in the pandemic era. These findings agree with the conclusions reached by Liguori and Pitzz (2020) as well as Czifra and Molnár (2020).

Participants narrated their marketing experiences at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic. The narratives were around 5 themes, namely: communication, social responsibility, distribution, ethics, and purchasing. Specifically, participants expressed how they changed their communication. They sent customers solidarity messages; changed their languages and images to conform to the COVID-19 situation, for example, pasting images of face masks and hand washing in their business premises; provided product information related to COVID-19, and encouraged customers to stay safe. Participants felt that these acts were rewarding. Meanwhile, some participants who did not keep customer contact information said they were unable to reach out and thus lost touch with some customers. Accordingly, participants emphasised that creating and maintaining an up-to-date customer database is critical to connecting with customers and maintaining strong relationships during pandemics. These findings concur with the conclusions of Dore et al (2020) that during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies that lead with empathy and genuinely address customer needs can strengthen relationships.

It was interesting to find that participants, although running micro and small businesses, understood the need for social responsibility. Participants reported that during the lockdown, they partnered with philanthropists to donate palliatives to people, made goods affordable for customers in financial crisis, and spread information about the disease to enable customers to stay safe. The participants said that these acts were both psychologically and economically rewarding, in line with Hoekstra and Leeftang (2020) and Dore et al. (2020). Participants described customers' responses to their efforts to enforce some rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19. They expressed that some customers did not like the enforcement of the measures, especially hand washing. Describing the reasons for such behaviours, participants mentioned



that the facilities for hand washing were substandard. Some participants also said they hiked their prices, not just to make more profit, but to be able to reorder the goods. On the other hand, some participants said they reduced the prices instead to assist their customers. Participants reported that purchasing was difficult as they experienced scarcity of goods and higher cost of goods and transportation, which agrees with (Begley, 2013).

Participants narrated how they increased sales by advertising products on social media and using e-commerce platforms, in line with Czifra and Molnár (2020). Unfortunately, many of the marketers did not have adequate digital skills to digitalise operations, a situation they described as a major setback in their marketing efforts at the peak of the pandemic.

Concerning the lessons learned, five dominant themes emerged, including market intelligence, coopetition (cooperation in competition), succession planning, digitalization of key marketing processes and resources (digital tools, human, and financial resources). Participants felt that the lockdown took them by surprise and therefore thought that there is a need for businesses to follow trends of events and regulations, forecast future events, make decisions fast, and face the realities. Interpretation of data also reveals that regular meeting of competitors was an effective way for small businesses to think together and find solutions to common problems. However, they felt that they needed to do more of it; to reduce competition and increase cooperation in times like the pandemic, to ensure the survival of their businesses.

Given that pandemics, beyond livelihoods, also threaten lives and health, it was found that small businesses, most of which are family businesses, should take succession planning seriously to survive pandemics. Participants reported that death and ill-health unexpectedly created vacancies in businesses at the peak of the pandemic, and are disrupting their business activities. Participants also emphasized the need for businesses to digitalize operations, especially communication and distribution, in line with Adhi et al. (2020). Participants also felt that digital skills and literacy are paramount to successful marketing in the pandemic, and many of them reported that their lack of digital literacy prevented them from performing optimally. Participants also expressed the need for small businesses to own basic work tools, including android phones, social media handles, and other e-commerce platforms. In addition, participants felt the need for committed and capable human resources, financial savings, as well as the need to keep a reasonable part of their assets liquid so that they can get quick access to the money they need to manage a crisis.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has deepened and expanded the understanding of how small businesses conducted marketing activities at the peak of COVID-19. their products at the peak of COVID-19. Interpretation of the data indicates that proactiveness, adaptability, empathy, and responsibility are important for small businesses to survive pandemics and cope with the new normal. History has shown that pandemics occur from time to time, and experts anticipate that pandemics will keep reoccurring as long as international travel, globalization, and migration are on the rise. Thus, COVID-19 is partly a warning about the nature of things to come. Given the foregoing and the fact that some changes that occurred during the pandemic may never reverse, it is recommended that small businesses develop the skills that have been identified, not just to be able to cope with future challenges but also to cope with the new normal.



In addition, business educators, consultants, and small business coordinating organisations should integrate the teaching of the identified skills in their training programmes to help small businesses acquire the necessary skills to cope with the pandemic and other hard times. As seen in this study, a pandemic can threaten or claim the lives of key stakeholders in small businesses, which are usually family businesses. Small businesses should therefore plan for succession by training interested and capable members of the family to be capable of managing the business if need arises.

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