

INFLUENCE OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING ON CUSTOMER PATRONAGE OF HOTELS IN PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to empirically investigate the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt, by adopting non-experimental correlational survey design, with questionnaire as major instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by marketing experts with a reliability index of 0.87 and 0.9 for both that of customers and service providers respectively, via Karl Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The study target population was the set of all the hotels in Rivers State while, the accessible population was the set of hotels registered and permitted to operate in Port Harcourt city of Rivers State. A sample of 50 hotels which satisfied the criteria for the study was selected from the accessible population of the study. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study, and the hypotheses tested via inferential parametric z-statistic. Results revealed that there is significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt. There is significant relationship between customer care and customer loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt. Consequently, the following recommendations among others were made: Hoteliers should ensure that a long-term relationship is built and continued with their customers by satisfying their evolving needs via quality customer service and sometimes going beyond customers' expectations. Emphasis should be on proactive positive customer care experience including personalized service, giving value to customers and providing additional satisfaction by building on existing relationships as to remain competitive.

Keywords: Relationship Marketing, Customer Patronage, Customer service, Customer Care, Hotels, Repeat Visits, Customer Loyalty, Profitability

INTRODUCTION

Firms do not just want to remain need satisfiers and profit makers but to be seen as valuable friends and solution providers to their customers. This calls for effective Relationship Marketing. The ability to properly understand and come up with the best way to manage customer relationship has become a very interesting topic to both marketing practitioners and the academia (Gronroos, 2017). Successful hotels in the hospitality industry have discovered the importance of customers to the success and survival of an enterprise. Thus, Vavra (2018) studied a group of pharmaceutical and toiletries enterprises in Lagos State with a view to finding out how their marketing policies affect sales. It was established that organizations are moving away from product and brand centered approach to customer centered concern and friendly organizational policies in their marketing practices. The study also found that cheerful customer service with courtesies and pleasantries on the part of marketing personnel produce customer satisfaction and loyalty.

No doubt, sound relationship marketing calls for development and building of productive relationship with customers, shareholders and employees (Nwokah, & Gladson-Nwokah, 2015). This calls for the hotels being customer-centric as this is the only way they can adequately identify and satisfy the needs of their customers. To remain in business hotels today must focus on

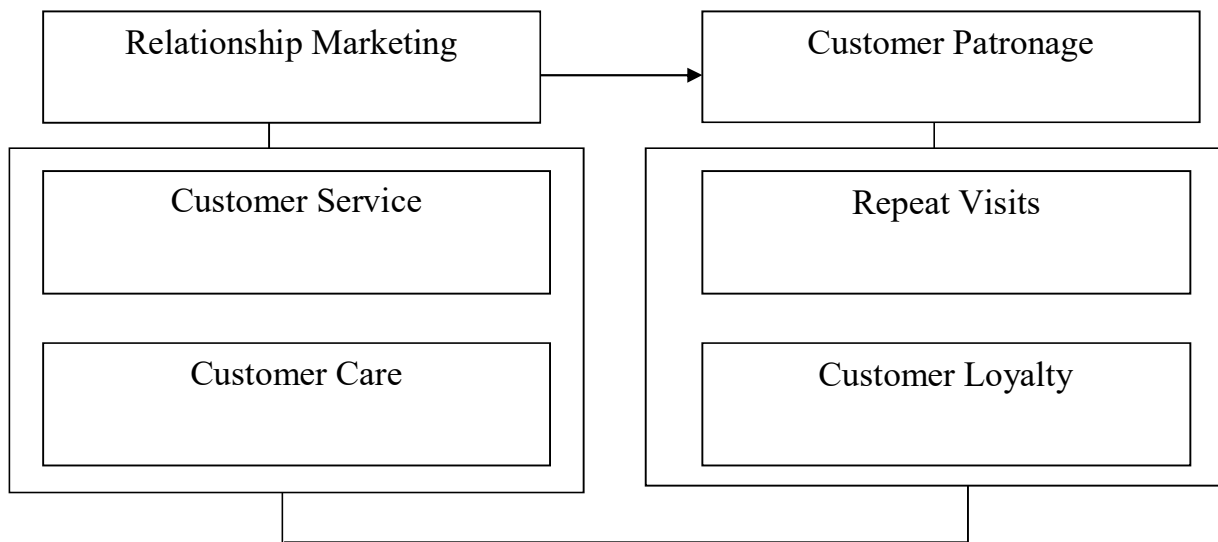
customer relationships to enjoy customer repeat purchase and strengthening their loyalty rather than on incessant acquisition of new ones (Kotler & Keller, 2012). After all, it cost much more acquiring new customer than retaining existing ones, since existing customers will have more confidence in the firms' offerings compared to new customers. It has also been suggested that relationship marketing is beneficial to firms because it can foster customer loyalty and repeat purchase behavior (Shani & Chalasani, 1992). Moreover, customers in our competitive business environment are more informed than ever before, they feel and expect that firms are there for them to provide the best product, with the best value and the best service, build cordial relationship, and our study is centered on the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage, drawing our empirical analysis from hotels in Port Harcourt.

Customer relationship marketing remains the channels open to engage, render customer service, customer care by the hotels as to be patronized and remain competitive. The emphasis is a radical movement away from being transaction-driven to being process-driven as to grasps the value of the lifetime customer and the significance of avoiding defections on the part of customers that are always asking for more care, quality service, collaboration and formidable relationship. Hotels can relay their relationship marketing message through value creation strategy statements like offering best product or service, best price etc. In implementing relationship marketing, marketers need to be clear, concise, personal, and relevant, defying expectations, engaging your audience and follow up (Chukundah, Morrison & Nwachukwu, 2022). Ann Handley, Head of Content Marketing Profs maintained that relationship marketing refers to an arrangement where both the buyer and seller have an interest in a more satisfying exchange. This approach aims to transcend the post-purchase-exchange process with a customer in order to make richer contact by providing a more personalized purchase, using the experience to create stronger ties.

Statement of the Problem

Customer relationship marketing is a complex task and many hotels do not make it a point of duty to carry out their customer relationship activities on a continuous basis. It is not enough to attend to the needs of customers at the point of patronage and end the effort there. More challenging is following-up customer care and service employed to achieve the best of marketing outcomes. The challenge is for hotels to follow up their customers as follow-up customer care and service must be employed to achieve the best of marketing outcomes. Hospitality firms like hotels must have continuous training programme as to equip their personnel with skills and experience to carry out this all-important task of customer relationship considering the fact that today's customers have become sophisticated and more knowledgeable. New strategies should also be devised and deployed to sustain customer interest and attention in order to improve customer patronage and loyalty, the challenge of perfectly tailoring products and services to meet customers' needs, desires and expectations in order to gain customer satisfaction (Obi. 2022). To intensify customer relationships, businesses need to take care of the existing customers, pay attention to them, listen to them, know what each customer wants and demands, what their priority needs and requirements are - in other words, to know as much about them as possible while listening to them (Huber & O'Gorman, 2008). It's against this backdrop this study is set to empirically investigate the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt.

Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher's Desk, 2023.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the extent to which customer service enhance repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt.
2. Determine the extent to which customer care enhance customer Loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt.

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of the study the following research questions are posed:

1. To what extent does customer service enhance repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt?
2. To what extent does customer care enhance customer Loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses stated in null form guided the study acceptance or rejection of which helped in reinforcing the findings of the study:

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between customer care and customer Loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt

Significance of the Study

The interest in this study is its ability to unravel the influence of customer relationship marketing on patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt, which hoteliers, captains of industries would significantly benefit from. They should be properly guided in realizing the importance of keeping or retaining their customers. Customers are to equally benefit as organizations learn to be customer centric, thereby giving deserved value to their customers if they must remain in business. The study would in no small way benefit other researchers on similar study, being rich in literature of knowledge, to serve as reference point.

Review of Related Literature

Relationship Marketing

Chukundah, Morrison and Nwachukwu (2022) agreed that in marketing relating and building relationship with your customer is considered most important decision to take as to remain competitive, stressing that customers are those that do buy your product, thereby keeping you in business. Firms in carrying out customer relationship marketing (CRM) a term used interchangeably with customer relationship management are creating and developing personalized relationships with customers as to increase their profitability. Wachyudi (2018) defines relationship marketing as a closer introduction to each consumer by creating two-way communication thereby managing a mutually beneficial relationship between consumers and companies. Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM) or Relationship Marketing (RM) as a technique was first proposed by American marketing scholars Berry (2002) and Jackson (1985). Chukundah, et al (2022) rightly opted that CRM is used by companies in this case hotels to understand their customers or guest and the aspects that influence customers satisfaction and loyalty, stressing that a well-planned customer loyalty program allows hotels to reward loyal customers, and it helps hotels to identify potential loyal customers, thereby serving them better than competitors. Combining both can encourage loyal customer retention and having customers as your advocates, because you provided additional satisfaction while building on existing relationships. Loyal customers are those who give you repeat business since they are satisfied with your service and they are well treated as they grow to be your business advocates and partners.

In the same vein, physical environmental cues also communicate and projects mission and image to the consumer (Bitner, 1990; 1992); so also do behaviour and attitudes of source personnel in indicating the level and quality of services offered by the service firm as they considerably influence on the customer's satisfaction (Crosby, Evans & Cowles, 1990). Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) posited that when determining the mix of services to offer its customers, management must ensure that services are offered in a responsive and timely manner so that customers do not wait for service. It takes successful hotels to offer quality customer service, customer care and customer engagement. Study by Haghghi et al (2012) in Tehran using 268 fast food restaurant customers, revealed that food quality, price, service quality, restaurant atmosphere and customer satisfaction have positive significant effect on loyalty. Even so, Sefian, Jami, Sharudin and Abdullah (2013) studied in Malaysia, on the patrons' of local home grown fast food restaurant; they found that food quality and service quality are the most important determinants of re-patronizing any fast food restaurant.

Customer Patronage

In the context of marketing, patronage is an exchange process where one receives a service or goods in exchange for money or other considerations. Customer patronage is therefore, the purchase of goods and service from a vendor by a customer or a business. The customer purchases and expects to derive benefits or satisfaction from the goods or services as consideration for the exchange or money paid. According to Anderson and Sullivan (1993), customer expectations of satisfaction lead to an increase in tendencies to purchasing a particular brand. They reiterated that firms that provide high quality products and services on a regular basis will have more satisfied customers and these customers will likely re-patronize the service and products next time. These assertions are supported by Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (1999) when indicating that comparatively, firms that offer service of superior quality is bound to get their customers satisfied as well as get higher economic returns more than their competitors. It actually takes satisfied guest to revisit a service provider. This informs why managers use customer satisfaction to forecast loyalty that ultimately leads to repurchase or visits. On this basis it is expected that customers of hotels will opt for the sources that meet their quality and value expectations over those that do not; and ignorant will experience customer traffic decline as guests support competing hotels (Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995). Thus, customer's loyalty is

founded not only on hotel's remarkable service, but may also be influenced by other factors such as hotels image, personnel quality, food quality, hotel atmospheric, products, services and price, that is pivotal in the delivery process.

Nwulu, and Nwokah (2018) affirmed that customer service management contributes significantly to marketing performance thereby enhancing measures such as sales growth, market share and profitability of food and beverage firms in the Nigerian manufacturing industry. Customer relationship management had significant positive effect on customer loyalty in the hospitality industry (Okoye, 2021). It was found that CRM components such as (customer orientation, customer advocacy and customer knowledge) except customer engagement are having positive impact on customer loyalty (Agu, Kalu, & Agaeze, 2017). Carmen, and Marius, (2016) in their "Customer Loyalty Using Customer Relationship Management addressed system - Customer Relationship Management customer service perspective as the reason why there are organizations, stressing that organization and its leadership must adopt a customer orientation and to show more attention to its demands.

Theoretical Framework

The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing

The study is built on commitment-trust theory, which proposes that as company delivers value to customer, strength of its relationship with the customer will improve and increasing the customer retention. The phrase "relationship marketing" appeared in the services marketing literature for the first time in a 1983 paper by Berry (Barnes 1994; Grnrroos 1994). Berry defined relationship marketing as "attracting, maintaining and in multi-service organizations--enhancing customer relationships" Relationship marketing theory proposes that as company delivers value to customer, strength of its relationship with the customer will improve and increase the customer retention. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing says that two fundamental factors, trust and commitment, must exist for a relationship to be successful. Relationship marketing involves forming bonds with customers by meeting their needs and honoring commitments. Hence, businesses rather than chasing short-term profits, in following the principles of relationship marketing forge long-lasting bonds with their customers. As a result, customers trust these businesses, and the mutual loyalty helps both parties fulfill their needs. The adoption of the relationship marketing is in recognition of benefits of having loyal customers, knowing that a lost customer can hardly be regained. Moreover, it's cheaper retaining a customer than sourcing new customer (Kalu, 1998; Chukundah, et al. 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A non-experimental correlation survey design was employed with the understanding to determine whether or not the dependent and independent variables in this study were related. Measurements in mode of responses to the research questions were elicited from the respondents using questionnaire as the research instrument. Descriptive statistics and parametric inferential measures were adopted to determine the magnitude and direction of the suspected relationship where it existed.

Population

The target population for this study was the set of all the hotels in Rivers State while, the accessible population was the set of hotels registered and permitted to operate in Port Harcourt city of Rivers State.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

A sample of 50 hotels which satisfied the following criteria was selected from the accessible population for this study.

- a. Hotel must be registered and permitted to operated in Rivers State and situate in Port Harcourt metropolis.
- b. Hotel must have been in business for at least one year.

A random sampling technique was adopted to select the respondents to the questions in the research instrument for this study.

Instrument of Data Collection

The research instrument used for data collection for this study was a well-structured questionnaire for customers and service providers in the selected hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Validation of the Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was subjected to scrutiny and scholarly perused by notable senior lecturers in the department of marketing who are authorities in the field of marketing and its affiliates. They particularly emphasized on the content and construct components of the instrument. Their observations, corrections and critiques were incorporated in the final form of the research instrument.

Reliability of Instrument

In order to establish or determine the reliability of the research instrument, the split-half method was adopted. Since two categories of respondents - the customers and the service providers in the hotels were considered in this study, two groups, therefore, of 100 customers and 25 service providers were selected for the purpose of determining the reliability of the research instrument. Each of these groups was split into two halves, after the instrument had been administered and retrieved, using even and odd numbers to separate responses of the respondents. The even and odd groups representing the two halves were correlated using Karl Pearson Product Moment Correlation method. Then, the reliability on the full test was given by Spearman Brown formula:

$$r_f = \frac{2 \times \text{reliability on } 1/2 \text{ test}}{1 + \text{reliability on } 1/2 \text{ test}}$$

i.e., $r_f = \frac{2 \times r_{1/2}}{1 + r_{1/2}}$

$r_{1/2}$ for the customers and service providers were obtained as 0.78 and 0.82 respectively.

Thus, the reliability on full test for the customers and service providers are respectively obtained as follows:

$$r_{fc} = \frac{2 \times 0.78}{1 + 0.78} = \frac{1.56}{1.78} = 0.8764$$

and $r_{fc} = \frac{2 \times 0.82}{1 + 0.82} = \frac{1.64}{1.82} = 0.9011$

or 87.64% or 90.11%

These reliability coefficients indicate that the instrument was reliable.

Data Collection

The copies of the research instrument were administered on a drop – and – pick basis by the researcher.

The table below depicts the administration and retrieval distribution of the instrument.

Category of Respondents	Number of Copies		Percentage
	Administered	Retrieved	
Customer	1,500	1,500	100
Service Provider	200	200	100

Table 1: Distribution of copies of the Research Instrument to the Customers and Service Providers of the selected Hotels in Port Harcourt

50 hotels were selected. 4 service providers and 30 randomly selected customers were considered for each hotel. These cumulated to 200 and 1,500 customers respectively.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential parametric statistics were employed in the analysis of the collated data from the customers and service providers of the selected hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The descriptive statistics used include arithmetic means, variances and standard deviations, and the inferential parametric statistic used was the Z-test.

Analysis and Presentation of Data

Our focus here was deployed to providing answers to the research questions and testing the research hypotheses using the elicited data from the respondents and appropriate tools.

Presentation of Data

Research Question One: To what extent does customer service enhance repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt?

Table 2: Extent to which customer service enhances repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt

Questionnaire Items	Extent of Enhancement				Number N	Mean (\bar{x})	Std Dev (σ)
	4 High	3 Moderate	2 Low	1 Indifferent			
Customers are promptly attended to	650	500	300	50	1,500	3.17	0.86
	102	80	10	8	200	3.38	0.76
The hotel rooms are very neat	720	600	100	80	1,500	3.31	0.82
	90	85	20	5	200	3.30	0.75
Customers are satisfied with the hotel cordial relationship	800	500	150	50	1,500	3.37	0.80
	115	65	15	5	200	3.45	0.74

Source: Survey Data, 2023.

Standard reference mean for the distribution is 2.50.

Table 2 above shows that all the mean ratings obtained for the various items measured are greater than the standard reference mean of 2.50. This implies that all the respondents were of the view that service assurance enhances customer referral to hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers

State. Also, the small values of the associated standard deviation to all the attributes measured, clearly indicated that the respondents were homogeneous in their responses.

Table 3: Means, variances and standard deviations of responses of the respondents to research question one

X_1	X_1	X_1^2	X_2^2
3.17	3.38	10.0489	11.4244
3.31	3.30	10.9561	10.8900
3.37	3.45	11.3569	11.9025
9.85	10.13	32.3619	34.2169

$N_1 = 1,500, \bar{X}_1 = 3.283,$

$\delta_1^2 = 0.0070, \delta_1 = 0.083$
 $N_2 = 200, \bar{X}_2 = 3.377, \delta_2^2 = 0.0038, \delta_2 = 0.0613$

Test of Hypothesis One

Null hypothesis (H_{01}): There is no significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt.

i.e., $H_{01}: \bar{x}_1 = \bar{x}_2$

Research hypothesis (H_{a1}): There is significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt

i.e., $H_{a1}: \bar{x}_1 \neq \bar{x}_2$ (a 2-tailed test)

Test statistics: Z-test was appropriate for N being large.

Level of significance (α) = 0.05

Number of degrees of freedom (df) = $N - 2 = 898$

Rejection Region: Reject H_{03} if $Z_{cal} > Z_{tab}$.

Calculation of the value of the test statistic using the formula:

$$Z = \frac{\bar{x}_2 - \bar{x}_1}{\sqrt{\frac{\sigma_1^2}{N_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{N_2}}}$$

Substituting, we have:

$$Z_{cal} = \frac{3.377 - 3.283}{\sqrt{\frac{0.0070}{1500} + \frac{0.0038}{200}}} = \frac{0.094}{0.00486}$$

Therefore, $Z_{cal} = 19.322$ the results of the analysis are tabulated as follows:

Table 4: Z-Test of the Relationship between Customer Service and Repeat Visits to Hotels in Port Harcourt.

Group	Mea n (\bar{x})	Std Dev (σ)	N	df	Std Err	Z-cal	Z-tab	Decision
Customer	3.283	0.0838	150	1,698	0.00486	19.322	1.960	Fail to accept H_{01}
Service Provider	3.377	0.0613	200					

Decision: calculated Z-value (i.e. Z-cal) is greater than its tabulated value (i.e. Z-tab), fail to accept H_{01} .

This means that there was a significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Research Question Two

To what extent does customer care enhance customer loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt?

Table 5: Extent to which Customer Care Enhances Customer Loyalty to Hotels in Port Harcourt

Questionnaire Items	Extent of Enhancement				Number N	Mean (x)	Std Dev (σ)
	4 High	3 Moderate	2 Low	1 Indifferent			
Customers are highly valued in the hotels	560	480	270	190	1,500	2.94	1.03
	150	30	15	5	200	3.62	0.73
The hotels settings are very comfortable	620	430	250	200	1,500	2.98	1.05
	130	40	20	10	200	3.45	0.75
The hotels facilities are adequate	670	390	260	180	1,500	3.03	1.05
	140	40	15	5	200	3.58	0.74

Source: Survey Data, 2023.

Standard reference mean for the distribution is 2.50.

Table 4.4 reveals that all the mean ratings computed for the various items measured are greater than the standard reference mean of 2.50. This implies that all the respondents were of the view that customer care enhances customer loyalty to hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Also, the small values of the associated standard deviation to all the items measured, vividly indicated that the respondents were homogeneous in their responses.

Table 6: Means, variances and standard deviations of responses of the respondents to research question two

X_1	X_1	X_1^2	X_2^2
2.94	3.62	8.6436	13.1044
2.98	3.45	8.8804	11.9025
3.03	3.58	9.1809	12.8164
8.95	10.65	26.7049	37.8233

$N_1 = 1,500, \bar{X}_1 = 2.983,$

$$N_2 = 200, \bar{X}_2 = 3.550, \delta_1^2 = 0.0014, \delta_1 = 0.0368, \delta_2^2 = 0.0053, \delta_2 = 0.0726$$

Test of Hypothesis Two

Null (or statistical) hypothesis (H_{02}): There is no significant relationship between customer care and customer loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt

i.e., $H_{02}: \bar{x}_1 = \bar{x}_2$

Alternative (or research) hypothesis (H_{a2}): There is significant relationship between customer care and customer Loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt

i.e., $H_{a2}: \bar{x}_1 \neq \bar{x}_2$ (a 2-tailed test)

Test statistics: Z-test was appropriate for sample size (N) being large and distribution of data, approximately normally distributed.

Level of significance (α) = 0.05

Number of degrees of freedom (df) = $N - 2 = 1,698$

Rejection Region (RR): Fail to accept H_{02} if $Z_{\text{calculated}} > Z_{\text{tabulated}}$.

Calculation of the value of the test statistic (Z) using the formula:

$$Z = \frac{\bar{x}_2 - \bar{x}_1}{\sqrt{\frac{\sigma_1^2}{N_1} + \frac{\sigma_2^2}{N_2}}}$$

Substituting, we have:

$$Z_{\text{cal}} = \frac{3.550 - 2.983}{\sqrt{\frac{0.0014}{1500} + \frac{0.0053}{200}}} = \frac{0.567}{0.00524}$$

Therefore, $Z_{\text{cal}} = 108.254$

The results are presented in a tabular form as shown below

Table 7: Z-test of the Relationship between Customer Care and Loyalty to Hotels in Port Harcourt.

Group	Mean (\bar{x})	StdDev (σ)	N	Df	Std Err	Z-cal	Z-tab	Decision
Customer	2.983	0.0368	1500	1,698	0.00524	108.254	1.960	Reject Ho ₂
Service Provider	3.550	0.0726	200					

Decision: Zcal > Ztab, Reject Ho₂.

This means that there was a significant relationship between customer care and customer loyalty to hotels in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study on influence of relationship marketing on customer patronage of hotels in Port Harcourt opted that successful hotels understand that the key to patronage in form of customer repeat visits and loyalty actually lies with long-term customers' relationship in the form of quality customer service and care respectively. Hence, in carrying out customer relationship marketing (CRM) a term used interchangeably with customer relationship management are creating and developing personalized relationships with customers as to increase their patronage and profitability. No doubt, Customers are the life-blood of any sort of business model, as such paying heed upon customer relationships is an inevitable and often highly beneficial area to invest in. Moreover, it's now recognized that building stronger relationships with existing customers is the way to ensure that hotels survive in turbulent and/or competitive market conditions. The study strongly held that there is significant relationship between customer service and repeat visits to hotels in Port Harcourt. There is significant relationship between customer care and customer Loyalty of hotels in Port Harcourt. Consequently, the following recommendations were made: Hoteliers should ensure that a long-term relationship is continued with their customers by satisfying their evolving needs via quality customer service and sometimes going beyond their expectations. Emphasis should be on proactive positive customer care experience including personalized service, giving value to customers and providing additional satisfaction by building on existing relationships as to remain competitive.

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