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DIGITALIZATION AND SALES PROMOTION AMONG SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES MANAGERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which SMEs are using digital marketing techniques to boost sales and the implications for counselling in Nigeria. The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised 1630 registered entrepreneurs who owned small-scale and medium enterprises in Awka South Local Government area. The proportionate sample was adopted in deriving the sample from different sectors of SMEs in the area. A researcher- developed questionnaire was used in the data collection. The instrument was validated and the reliability was also established. The questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze data collected from the respondents. Findings revealed the extent of utilizing email marketing tools for sale promotion by SMEs. This implies counsellors' advocacy on the roles of digitalization in promoting the services of managers of SMEs for improved productivity. It was among others recommended that counsellors should counsel managers of SMEs to utilize SEO tools to identify relevant keywords and phrases that align with your products, services, and target audience; conduct comprehensive keyword research to uncover high-volume, low-competition keywords that have the potential to drive targeted traffic to their website; incorporate these keywords strategically into their website content, Meta tags, headings, and URLs.

Keywords: Online advertising, email marketing, search engine optimization, sales promotion

Introduction

Guidance and counselling as a course of study has been variously defined by various authors. According to Keyes and Wilson (2018) defined guidance and counselling as a process that assists individuals in discovering and developing their educational, vocational, and psychological potentials, allowing them to achieve an optimal level of personal pleasure and societal usefulness. Again, Akinade (2015) noted that guidance and counselling are the entirety of meticulously gathered and collated, current and correct services that counsellors deliver to students or customers for them to make informed choices. As rightly noted by Mweemba (2016) guidance and counselling can also be seen as an act or tool used to prevent,

remediate, or correct students who engage in social experimentation. Operationally, guidance and counselling involve services and programmes that enhance personal, social, educational, and vocational development. Counselling services are very relevant to digital marketers such as managers of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Digital marketing, a subset of marketing, is the practice of promoting goods and services using the internet and other online-based digital platforms, including mobile phones, desktop computers, and other media and platforms. Digital marketing, according to Alex (2018), is a type of marketing used to advertise and sell goods and services online. Digital marketing, as opposed to traditional marketing, generates more money since it has a higher return on investment and conversion rate (Abdurrahhman, Erna, Anang, and Mohammad, 2021). It is accessible and economical (Amura, 2021). Despite being much more expensive than conventional advertising, it is very effective. It comprises numerous tactics that jointly aid in business growth, such as SEO, social media marketing, pay-per-click, email marketing, etc. Digital marketing tools make it simpler, more effective, and less time-consuming to conduct digital marketing. They support the efficient execution of digital marketing initiatives and make sure the desired target is reached. As noted by John (2020), digital marketing tools are effective tools for marketing a business online and bringing organic visitors. As a result of the increased traffic, the company becomes more visible, which boosts sales and revenue. The development of SMEs is aided by the promotion of sales through digital marketing. In this study, focus is in three components of digitalization marketing tools: email; search engine optimization and online advertising for sales promotion among managers of SMEs.

According to Martin, Radovan, and Malleriak (2019), email marketing is the most popular type of direct marketing at the moment. It is a low-cost but powerful technique of marketing for both potential and current clients. Email marketing is the practice of sending promotional emails to a list of contacts who have specifically agreed to hear from you via email.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the visibility of a website or webpage on a search engine results page (SERP) to make a company's website more discoverable (i.e., on the first page/s), thereby driving traffic and sales.

Online advertising also known as online marketing, internet advertising, digital advertising, or web advertising is a form of marketing that use the internet to promote products and services to audience or platform users. According to Beth and Steven (2018), Indeed, online advertising is only growing in scope, as new avenues for marketers pop up (think ads delivered through text messages or marketing messages delivered to users in a certain area, known as geo-targeting). These digitalization marketing tools are very efficient in sales promotion.

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Sales promotion is an increase in the volume of commercial revenue produced over time by an enterprise firm. You could need to extend your market, ramp up your marketing efforts, roll out new products or services, or enhance customer service in order to boost sales. According to Macy (2020), in order to grow sales, you need a strong sales strategy or plan that identifies key benchmarks. SMEs must employ the appropriate digital marketing techniques if they want to increase sales. This is what inspired the current study on SMEs' use of digital marketing tools for increasing sales promotion by SMEs.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are privately owned businesses whose capital, assets, and manpower are limited. These small and medium businesses operate in small production companies like small bakeries, small shops, large shopping malls, small restaurants, etc. According to Susan (2020), he noted that a small and mid-size firm (SME) is a company that has revenues, assets, or staff counts below a specific threshold. The standards for classifying a SME differ between nations and occasionally between industries. Compared to larger companies, small and medium-sized businesses are more actively involved in the expansion of employment. In order to establish a skilled industrial base and industries and a ready service sector that may boost GDP through increased value-added, SMEs can thus produce significant benefits. As a result of the technologies and talents they utilize and develop, marketing has become one of the main techniques used by SMEs.

Statemen of the Problem

Managers of small enterprises generally struggle with profitability, early SME failure, low sales turnover, and growth obstacles due to the implementation of digital marketing. Although SMEs have access to digital marketing, even the smallest business finds it challenging to use it to market their product effectively. This is because SMEs lack strategies to implement digital marketing to increase derivative sales, generate profit, and achieve financial growth. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, little to no empirical research has been done to determine the extent to which SMEs are using digital marketing techniques to boost sales. This made it of utmost importance.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study.

1. How effective is the use of email marketing tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?
2. How effective is the use of search engine optimization tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?
3. How effective is the use of search online advertising tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?

Research Method

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. The population of the study comprised 1630 registered entrepreneurs who owned small-scale and medium enterprises in Awka South Local Government area. The taro Yamane formula was used to determine the sample size of the

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study which is 321 SMEs in Awka South, LGA, Anambra State. A proportionate sample was adopted in deriving the sample from different sectors of SMEs in the area. A researcher- developed questionnaire was used in the data collection. The instrument was divided into Sections A and B. Section A concentrated on the demographic information of respondents while Section B contained the items in clusters based on the three study questions. The survey was formatted using a 3-point rating of Very Effective (VE;3), Effective (E;2), Not Effective (NE;1). The instrument was validated by giving copies: two experts in business education in the Faculty of Technology and Vocational Education and one in Measurement and Evaluation, Faculty of Education, all in Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awka. The experts who were presented with the instrument, purpose of study, and research questions examined the items in terms of relevance, language, coverage of the scope of the study, general text format, and suitability. Their inputs considered in the final production of the instrument. The questionnaire, duly validated by the researcher was used to gather data. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze data collected from the respondents.

Presentation of Results

Research question 1: How effective is the use of email marketing tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?

Table 1: Respondents 'mean rating on the extent of utilizing email marketing for sales promotion.

S/N	E-MAIL MARKETING	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Email marketing helps in increasing sales revenue	3.02	.71	Very Effective
2	Email marketing builds stronger customer relationships	2.95	.81	Effective
3	Emails help to increase brand recognition	2.81	.89	Effective
4	Emails marketing helps to get immediate results	2.63	.82	Effective
5	Email marketing helps to grow the business audience	2.49	.85	Effective
6	Email marketing helps to maintain vendor relationships	2.46	1.0	Effective
7	Email marketing helps to build credibility	2.38	.97	Effective
	CLUSTER MEAN	**2.67**	**0.86**	**Effective**

Table 1 shows that all the seven-aspect depicting the quality of SMEs have mean ratings ranging from 3.4 and 4.0, which shows that the respondent agreed the extent of utilizing E-mail tools for sales promotion by SMEs involved an increase in sales revenue, building strong customer relationships, increase brand recognition, get immediate results, grow business audience, maintaining vendors relationships and build credibility. The cluster means of 3.6 shows that the extent of quality assurance in utilizing E-mail for sales promotion is highly extent. The standard deviation score for all the items is within the same range except for item no 2.

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Research question 2: How effective is the use of search engine optimization tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?

Table 2: Respondents 'mean rating on the extent of utilizing search engine optimization for sales promotion. **N=321**

S/N	SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION	Mean	SD	Remark
8	Search engine helps in increasing sales revenue	2.49	1.10	Effective
9	Search engine helps in growing your audience and reach	1.97	.91	Not Effective
10	It is relatively cheap and cost-effective.	1.82	1.10	Not Effective
11	It helps in managing your business reputation carefully	1.96	1.16	Not Effective
12	It helps in developing an integrated strategy to keep your business on track	1.91	1.21	Not Effective
13	It helps to understand the voice of the consumer	1.73	1.07	Not Effective
14	It helps to build trust and credibility	2.10	1.26	Effective
	CLUSTER MEAN	**1.99**	**1.27**	**Not Effective**

Table 2 shows that all the seven-aspect depicting the quality of SMEs have mean ratings ranging from 2.7 to 3.4, which shows that the respondents agreed on the extent of utilizing affiliate marketing tools for sales promotion by SMEs involved increasing sales revenue, growing audience, and reach, relatively cheap and cost-effective managing business reputation carefully, developing an integrated strategy to keep business track, building, and credibility. The cluster mean of 2.99 shows that the extent of quality assurance in utilizing affiliate marketing for sales promotion was the moderate extent. The standard deviation score for all the items is within the same range except for item no 9.

Research question 3: How effective is the use of search online advertising tools for sales promotion among managers of SMEs?

Table 3: Respondents 'mean rating on the extent of utilizing online advertising for sales promotion

S/N	ONLINE ADVERTISING	Mean	SD	Remark
15	Online advertising helps in increasing sales online revenue	2.94	.99	Effective
16	Online advertising helps to understand your target audience	2.83	.95	Effective
17	Online advertising helps in focusing on customer service.	2.73	.88	Effective
18	It helps to provide a chat feature on your website	2.71	.94	Effective
19	Online advertising helps to showcase your products with high-quality photo	2.93	.92	Effective
20	It helps to find your unique selling proposition	2.59	1.03	Effective
21	Online advertising helps in creating your business content	2.85	.91	Effective
	CLUSTER MEAN	**2.79**	**0.95**	**Effective**

Table 3 shows that all the seven-aspect depicting the quality of SMEs have mean ratings ranging from 2.59 to 2.94, which shows that the respondents agreed with the

use of online advertising tools for sales promotion by SMEs involved in increasing sales online revenue, understanding the target audience, focus on customer services, provide chat feature on the website, showcase the product with high-quality photo and creating business content. The cluster mean of 2.79 shows that the use of quality assurance in utilizing online advertising for sales promotion was effective. The standard deviation score for all the items is within the same range.

Discussion of Findings

The finding with respect to the first research question revealed the extent of utilizing email marketing tools for sale promotion by SMEs. The findings of this study revealed that email marketing tools are highly required by small and medium-scale enterprises because they help to increase sales revenue, build stronger customer relationships, increase brand recognition, get immediate results, maintain vendor relationships, and grow a business audience. The finding is in agreement with Elrod & Fortenberry (2020), email marketing enables a business to focus on particular consumer segments and display and promote goods and services to them with the aim of informing, reminding, and persuading them to make purchases. The results supported Shirsath's (2020) assertion that email marketing is a powerful tool for connecting with leads, nurturing them, and turning them into customers. He added that email marketing is a powerful tool for establishing relationships with leads, nurturing them, and turning them into customers. It is vital for several marketing tactics, including account-based marketing, inbound marketing, and content marketing.

The findings are also in consonance with Foued (2021) who found that one of the most cutting-edge tactics and marketing strategies used nowadays is email marketing. The distribution and transmission of electronic communications with the highest level of accuracy and precision is also made possible by contemporary information and communication technology. Email marketing efforts also aid in boosting sales in electronic stores and effectively and lawfully targeting clients. The survey also found a significant difference between the items on respondents' mean judgments of the extent to which SMEs used email marketing tools to increase sales depending on how long they had been in business (0–10 years/11 and above).

The findings with regard to the second research question revealed the extent of utilizing search engine optimization tools for sale promotion by SMEs shows that small and medium-scale enterprises are in need of search engine tools for sale promotion because it helps to increase sales revenue, grow audience, is inexpensive and cost-effective, to keep business on track, and builds trust. The findings were in line with Sami's study from 2023, which found that SEO is crucial for small businesses because it can raise their profile and credibility, draw in targeted customers, improve user experience, and keep them one step ahead of the competition.

The results supported Shibli's (2021) assertion that search engine optimization is a technique for boosting both the caliber and volume of organic traffic to your website. If done correctly, it can provide your company with the exposure it needs through relevant, unpaid search engine results. The study also showed that there is no statistically significant difference between the respondents' mean ratings on how much SMEs use online marketing tools to increase sales depending on how long they have been in business (0–10 years/11 and above).

And lastly, the findings on the third study question indicated that small and medium-sized businesses are largely dependent on online advertising marketing techniques for increasing sales. The findings were in line with a study by Emeh, Ahaiwe, and Okoro (2019), which claimed that online advertising is the impersonal, compensated presentation and promotion of products, services, and ideas via the Internet. According to Nazli et al. (2018), the expansion of media and communication networks has changed the commercial landscape of advertising. As a result, an online advertisement is now a crucial strategy for boosting a company's profit margin. The results are consistent with Hanif et al.'s (2018) findings that, despite the fact that most businesses do not consider acquiring market share without advertisements, online advertisements are among the most important marketing strategies available in the modern digital environment. They claimed that the impact of improved communication technology on the advertisement factor, which adds value to the buyer's choice, is causing the style of marketing research to become more modernized in the contemporary period. The survey also showed that there is a substantial difference between the items on respondents' mean evaluations on the extent to which SMEs use online marketing tools to increase sales as a result of their years of existence.

Counselling Implications for Managers of SMEs in Nigeria

Since it was found that the utilization of digital marketing tools, including social media marketing, search engine optimization, and online advertising, plays a vital role in driving sales promotion for SMEs, counselling services are therefore needed to enable managers of SMEs to adopt the use of digital marketing tools. Specifically, email marketing allows businesses to communicate directly with their target audience. By utilizing email marketing tools, businesses can reach out to customers who have explicitly expressed interest in their products or services, allowing for highly targeted communication. This direct and personalized approach increases the chances of engaging customers and driving sales. SEO tools help businesses optimize their websites and content to improve their search engine rankings. The visibility of businesses and their products is increased through higher ranks in search engine results pages (SERPs), leading to a higher influx of organic traffic. The study's implications suggest that improved online visibility and increased organic traffic can significantly contribute to sales promotion. This requires the counsellors' advocacy on the roles of digitalization in promoting the services of

managers of SMEs for improved productivity.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that digital marketing tools, specifically social media marketing, search engine optimization, and online advertising, have a positive impact on sales promotion for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Email marketing was found to be a significant factor that greatly influenced SMEs' sales promotion. Similarly, search engine optimization was identified as a significant tool for enhancing SMEs' sales. Furthermore, online advertising tools were found to be highly effective in boosting sales for SMEs.

Recommendations

From the research findings and conclusion, the following recommendation is made;

1. Counsellors should counsel managers of SMEs to utilize SEO tools to identify relevant keywords and phrases that align with your products, services, and target audience; conduct comprehensive keyword research to uncover high-volume, low-competition keywords that have the potential to drive targeted traffic to their website; incorporate these keywords strategically into their website content, Meta tags, headings, and URLs.
2. Counsellors should counsel managers of SMEs to define their campaign objectives before starting any online advertising efforts. Whether it's driving website traffic, generating leads, increasing conversions, or boosting sales, having well-defined goals will help them develop targeted and effective advertising strategies.
3. Managers of SMEs should be counselled to choose the online advertising platforms that align with their target audience and campaign objectives. Consider platforms like Google Ads, Facebook Ads, Instagram Ads, LinkedIn Ads, and others, based on the demographics and interests of the SMEs managers' target audience.

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