

Exploring the Link Between Customer-Centric Retailing and Viral Marketing Success

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Abstract: *A customer-centric approach to retailing is widely acknowledged as a fundamental business strategy. However, many retail businesses encounter difficulties in fully implementing this model. The objective of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to this discrepancy. In order to gain a deeper insight into the current perceptions of customer-centric retailing, a random sample of 250 customers and 25 retail employees in the Klang Valley was surveyed. The food and beverage sector, which experiences a notable amount of viral marketing activity, was the focus of the study. Thematic analysis indicates that viral marketing has the potential to exert a significant influence on customer-centric retail practices, particularly in terms of shaping brand engagement with consumers, reputation management, and sales strategies. The relationship between customer-centric retailing and viral marketing is contingent upon the creation of positive customer experiences that prompt individuals to disseminate those experiences through informal channels. When retailers prioritise understanding and addressing customer needs, they foster a sense of respect and satisfaction among customers, increasing the likelihood that those customers will promote their positive experiences to others – the very essence of viral marketing. However, various factors, such as organisational culture, leadership, technology, and the operational challenges unique to the retail industry, present obstacles that prevent a more effective adoption of a customer-centric approach.*

Keywords: Customer-Centric Retailing, Viral Marketing, Food and Beverage

1. Introduction

In the contemporary commercial environment, businesses are engaged in an ongoing pursuit of novel strategies for engaging consumers and stimulating sales. Customer-centric retailing and viral marketing, particularly within the food and beverage industry, present distinctive avenues for forging connections with consumers and bolstering brand loyalty. The concept of customer-centric retailing places an emphasis on the importance of understanding and responding to the individual needs of customers (Alexander & Varley, 2025). This approach involves the creation of personalized experiences with the aim of fostering loyalty and satisfaction among consumers. This approach is particularly pertinent in a retail environment where consumer preferences are undergoing rapid change, thereby necessitating a profound comprehension of customer behaviour. Conversely, viral marketing capitalizes on the potential

of social sharing and word-of-mouth to disseminate information about products and services. By creating content that is compelling to audiences, brands seek to generate interest and awareness, frequently employing social media platforms to extend their reach. These strategies are mutually reinforcing, as brands seek to create memorable experiences that not only satisfy consumer desires but also encourage social sharing, particularly in the food and beverage sector. From distinctive dining experiences to innovative packaging, the food and beverage industry is increasingly employing both customer-centric approaches and viral marketing techniques to capture consumer attention in an oversaturated market. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate the evolving dynamics of consumer engagement, where understanding customer needs, creating shareable content, and delivering exceptional food experiences are crucial for success. The key elements of customer-centric retailing include personalization, which entails tailoring products, services, and marketing messages to individual customers; customer experience, which involves enhancing the shopping experience both online and offline to foster customer loyalty; feedback mechanisms, which entail actively seeking and utilizing customer feedback to improve offerings; and omnichannel strategy, which entails providing a seamless shopping experience across various channels, such as online, mobile, and in-store.

The objective of this study is to examine the interrelationship between customer-centric retailing and viral marketing. This examination is undertaken with a view to elucidating the manner in which the two concepts are connected, as well as identifying the factors that contribute to the observed deficiency. In order to achieve this, it is first necessary to gain an understanding of the concept of customer-centric retailing.

2. Customer-Centric Retailing vs Viral Marketing

Customer-centric retailing is a business strategy that prioritizes the creation of a shopping experience that is tailored to the specific needs, preferences, and behaviors of customers (Hampton et al., 2022). This approach involves a deep understanding of customer desires and a capacity to anticipate their future needs. It often relies on the use of data and feedback to inform business strategies and guide decision-making.

In the context of a competitive market where consumer preferences are in a state of constant flux, customer-centric retailing is of paramount importance (P. C. et al., 2022). The rationale behind customer-centric retailing can be attributed to several factors (Gupta & Ramachandran, 2021).

- **Enhanced customer loyalty**
By focusing on the individual needs and preferences of customers, retailers can foster deeper emotional connections, which in turn lead to increased customer loyalty.
- **Enhanced sales and revenue**
Personalization frequently results in elevated conversion rates, as customers are more inclined to make purchases of products that resonate with them.
- **Competitive Advantage**
In a saturated market, an understanding of and responsiveness to customer desires can distinguish a retailer from competitors who adopt a more generic approach.
- **Improved customer insight**
Engaging with customers enables retailers to obtain valuable insights into purchasing behaviours and trends, which can then be utilized to inform future strategies and product offerings.

- A positive brand reputation
A concentration on the customer experience has the potential to augment brand perception and result in favourable word-of-mouth recommendations.

Viral marketing is a strategy that encourages individuals to disseminate marketing messages or content to others, frequently through social media and online platforms, thereby facilitating exponential growth in brand awareness and reach. This approach is predicated on the creation of engaging, entertaining, or emotionally resonant content that prompts consumers to disseminate it widely, effectively transforming customers into brand advocates (Peters et al., 2013).

The following characteristics are indicative of viral marketing:

- Shareability
The capacity of a given piece of content to be disseminated and shared by others is a key characteristic of viral marketing. The content must be readily shareable and resonate with the intended audience.
- Emotional Appeal
The capacity to elicit an emotional response from the audience is a crucial aspect of any viral marketing campaign. Viral campaigns that are successful often evoke strong emotions, whether humour, surprise, or nostalgia.
- Low Cost
Viral marketing frequently employs organic sharing, which can result in reduced marketing costs in comparison to traditional advertising.
- Engagement
The degree of engagement is a crucial factor in determining the success of a viral campaign. Such strategies encourage audience participation, fostering a sense of community and connection.

The viral phenomenon significantly impacts customer-centric retailing in the food industry. It has the potential to transform the way that food brands and retailers interact with customers and influence their strategies (Tuten & Solomon, 2015). The following is a comprehensive analysis of how the viral effect affects customer-centric retailing in the food industry.

- Enhanced Brand Awareness
The phenomenon of a food product or brand going viral is characterized by a rapid and extensive dissemination of information across a multitude of digital platforms. Such amplified visibility can facilitate enhanced brand awareness and recognition, thereby facilitating broader audience engagement for companies. In consequence of this heightened attention, brands may choose to reinforce their customer-centric approach by responding expeditiously to feedback and engaging with new customers.
- Consumer Engagement and Feedback
Viral content frequently elicits a considerable degree of engagement, encompassing comments, reviews, and social media interactions. Food brands may utilize this engagement to obtain valuable consumer feedback and insights. By listening to and addressing customer opinions, brands can better tailor their products and services to align with consumer needs and preferences.
- Influence on Purchasing Decisions
Viral trends have the potential to significantly influence consumer purchasing decisions. To illustrate, a food product that gains popularity through viral social media challenges or endorsements can experience a surge in demand. It is imperative that retailers and brands

demonstrate agility and responsiveness to these trends in order to capitalize on the opportunity and ensure effective fulfillment of the heightened demand.

- **Personalization and Customization**

The viral effect frequently serves to accentuate particular consumer preferences or prevailing flavor trends. Food brands may utilize this information to provide personalized or customized options that align with current trends. To illustrate, in the event of a particular dietary trend or flavor profile achieving popularity, brands may promptly introduce new products or modify their existing range to align with these preferences.

- **Community Building**

Viral content frequently fosters a sense of community around a particular brand or product. Food brands may leverage this sense of community by developing interactive and engaging experiences for their customers, both online and offline. This may entail the implementation of social media campaigns, the incorporation of user-generated content, or the organization of distinctive events that serve to cultivate a more profound connection between the brand and its consumer base.

- **Influencer Collaborations**

Influencers have been identified as a key factor in the dissemination of content that gains a high level of engagement on social media. Food brands may choose to form partnerships with influencers in order to enhance their reach and credibility. Such collaborations have the potential to enhance customer-centric strategies by leveraging the established relationships between influencers and their followers, as well as incorporating authentic endorsements into marketing efforts.

- **Real-Time Adaptation**

In order to respond adequately to the viral effect, it is imperative that a rapid response be initiated by the relevant brands. Food companies must be agile and prepared to modify their marketing strategies in real time based on emerging trends and consumer behaviors. This adaptability represents a fundamental aspect of customer-centric retailing, ensuring that brands remain relevant and responsive to their customers' evolving preferences.

- **Increased Competition and Market Pressure**

Although going viral can be advantageous, it also gives rise to intensified competition as other brands may hasten to capitalize on the same trends. In order to maintain their competitive advantage and continue to provide a customer-centric experience in the context of growing market pressure, food retailers must remain vigilant and innovative.

The viral effect serves to accentuate the significance of customer-centric retailing within the food industry, whereby it propels brand visibility, exerts an influence on consumer behavior, and presents avenues for engagement and adaptation (Kumar C V & Agrawal, 2024). Brands that effectively leverage the viral effect can strengthen their relationship with customers and gain a competitive advantage in a dynamic market.

3. The Role of the Influence Factor in the Context of Customer-Centric and Viral Marketing

In the Malaysian food and beverage sector, customer-centric practices lead to memorable experiences, which in turn inspire customers to share those experiences online. This creates a cycle where satisfied customers become brand advocates, enhancing visibility and attracting new customers through viral marketing.

Focus

Customer-centric means understanding what customers want. Businesses can tailor their offerings to match customer wants by gathering insights through surveys, feedback forms, and direct interactions. When customers feel a brand understands them, they are more likely to share good experiences. This can lead to word-of-mouth or viral marketing.

Experience

A customer-centric approach to business entails the creation of enjoyable and memorable dining experiences. This encompasses a multitude of factors, including the ambiance of the establishment and the quality of service provided, with the objective of ensuring that customers feel valued and engaged during their visit. The use of viral marketing increases the likelihood of memorable experiences being shared. If a customer has a positive experience at a restaurant, they are more likely to post about it on social media or inform their friends.

Engagement

Customer-centric retailing entails the establishment of robust relationships with customers that extend beyond the mere transaction. This may be achieved through the implementation of loyalty programs, the provision of personalized recommendations, or the facilitation of social media interactions. In contrast, viral marketing hinges on the notion that when customers feel a sense of connection to a brand, they are more inclined to engage with it and disseminate their experiences to others. The creation of engaging content can serve as a catalyst for customers to disseminate information about their experiences.

Feedback

In the context of customer-centric retailing, the active solicitation of customer feedback enables businesses to identify potential areas for improvement. This may entail modifying menu items in accordance with customer suggestions or addressing service issues. Furthermore, the strategic utilization of customer feedback can facilitate the creation of engaging content that resonates with customers, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns. The display of positive reviews and testimonials on social media can also serve to reinforce customer engagement.

Brand Loyalty

A customer-centric approach entails personalizing interactions and recognizing loyal customers, with the objective of fostering strong relationships that encourage repeat visits. Loyalty programs can offer incentives for customers to return. Viral marketing is a strategy that leverages the propensity of customers to advocate for a brand when they feel valued and rewarded. This advocacy can manifest as social media posts or recommendations to friends and family.

Table 1 presents a summary of the factors that influence the customer-centric and viral marketing strategies employed by food and beverage companies in Malaysia.

Table 1: Factors that Influence the Customer-Centric and Viral Marketing Strategies Employed by Food & Beverage Companies

Factors	Customer-Centric Retailing	Viral Marketing	How do they do it?
Focus	Understanding customer tastes and preferences	Encouraging customers to share their experiences	A Malaysian café offers a customizable menu based on customer feedback.
Experience	Creating enjoyable dining experiences	Leveraging customer stories and posts	A dessert shop hosts a "create your own dessert" event, encouraging attendees to share their creations online.
Engagement	Building relationships through excellent service	Creating shareable moments	A local restaurant invites customers to take photos at their unique dining setup, prompting social media posts.
Feedback	Actively seeking input to improve offerings	Using feedback for engaging content	A food delivery service asks customers to rate their meals and highlights popular dishes on social media, encouraging shares.
Brand Loyalty	Cultivating repeat customers through personalization	Boosting awareness through customer advocacy	A popular bubble tea shop rewards loyal customers with exclusive flavours that they can share on their profiles.

Source: Personal interview conducted by the author with relevant parties

4. Methodology

The process of conducting interviews with the objective of gaining insights into customer perceptions of customer-centric retailing and viral marketing entails the implementation of a series of structured steps. A comprehensive approach to conducting interviews with both 250 retail customers and 25 employees.

Thematic analysis is a highly valuable research tool, enabling investigators to examine customer perceptions in a comprehensive and illuminating manner, thereby facilitating the development of meaningful conclusions and recommendations. Its distinctive advantages include rich qualitative insights; flexibility; the capacity to identify patterns and organize data; alignment with research objectives; an exploratory nature; collaboration and co-creation; and the generation of actionable insights (Braun, V., & Clarke, V., 2023; Anizah et al., 2021-2022)

Table 2 provides a clear, structured approach to conducting interviews that can yield valuable insights into customer-centric retailing and viral marketing perceptions in the Klang Valley.

Table 2: Data Collection Approach

Step	Details
Define Objectives	Clearly outline objectives: - Understand customer experiences - Gauge perceptions of viral marketing - Identify areas for improvement in customer-centric practices

Table 2: Data Collection Approach (Continued)

Step	Details
Develop Questions	For Retail Customers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Define customer-centric retailing - Describe a memorable customer-focused experience - Share experiences on social media - Influential marketing types For Retail Employees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementing customer-centric practices - Successful viral marketing examples - Gathering customer feedback - Challenges in meeting expectations
Sampling Strategy	Ensure representation of demographics in Klang Valley: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider age, gender, income, and shopping habits
Choose Interview Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Face-to-Face: Direct interaction - Online Surveys: Use tools like Google Forms
Recruit Participants	Social Media: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Post invitations on relevant platforms Retail Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Collaborate with local retailers Employee Networks: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Direct outreach to retail companies
Conducting Interviews	Prepare Logistics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Schedule at convenient times, ensure quiet environment Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Explain purpose, ensure confidentiality Ask Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Start general, encourage detailed responses, record with permission Closing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Thank participants, ask for final thoughts
Analyse Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transcribe interviews, categorize responses by themes - thematic analysis - Use qualitative analysis to identify trends and insights
Report Findings	Compile findings into a structured report: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key insights on customer perceptions - Recommendations for improvement
Follow-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share a summary of findings with participants or stakeholders - Foster ongoing dialogue and improvement

5. Results

In January 2024, the researcher conducted interviews with 25 retail employees at the premises of the retailer in a setting that was convenient for the participants using purposive sampling. Prior to the interviews, the researcher made an appointment and established contact with the participants through the use of the researcher's professional networks. Purposive sampling is employed to investigate the nuances of customer-centric versus viral marketing approaches from the vantage point of retail employees for several reasons. Table 3 outlines the rationale for using purposive sampling in this context, emphasizing the benefits of targeted selection and the depth of insights that retail employees can provide regarding customer-centric and viral marketing strategies.

Table 3: The Rationale for Using Purposive Sampling

Reason	Details
Relevant Experience	Retail employees interact directly with customers, providing firsthand insights into both marketing approaches.
Specific Knowledge	Employees understand the implementation of customer-centric and viral marketing strategies, offering detailed feedback on effectiveness.
Diverse Perspectives	Selecting employees from various roles (e.g., sales, management) captures a wide range of experiences and viewpoints.
Identifying Challenges	Employees can highlight operational challenges and barriers specific to each marketing approach, offering valuable insights.
Feedback on Customer Interactions	Employees can share observations about customer responses to both strategies, aiding in understanding their impact.
Efficiency in Data Collection	Purposive sampling allows for quick and targeted data collection from knowledgeable individuals, enhancing research efficiency.
Focus on Cultural Context	Employees provide insights into how marketing strategies resonate within the specific cultural context of Malaysia.
Adaptation to Change	Employees are often aware of evolving consumer expectations and trends, which is critical for understanding both approaches.

Twenty-five retail employees were interviewed, and the results are presented in figure 1.



Figure 1: Issues Related to the Customer-Centric Approach

The data collection process for customer data was concluded in December 2023. The final sample size of 250 was obtained from the entire data collection, which was initially planned to include 300 respondents. The research employed a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who meet specific criteria pertinent to the study, such as being regular consumers of food and beverage brands in Malaysia. This guarantees that the sample is directly pertinent to the research focus. By selecting participants who possess experience or knowledge about customer-centric practices and viral marketing, researchers can obtain more profound insights and more meaningful data. This is particularly crucial when examining perceptions that may be subtle or intricate. Table 4 outlines the issues pertaining to the customer-centric and viral marketing approach, as discerned by the 250 respondents.

Table 4: Issues Pertaining to the Customer-Centric and Viral Marketing Approach

Strategy Type	Themes	Consumer Belief	How?
Customer-Centric	Personalization	Appreciated; leads to a more tailored and satisfying experience.	Customized menu recommendations based on past orders.
	Customer Engagement	Positively viewed; fosters community and connection with the brand.	Active interactions on social media platforms.
	Quality of Service	Essential; excellent service enhances loyalty and repeat business.	Friendly and attentive staff responses.
	Feedback Mechanisms	Valued; shows the brand cares about consumer opinions and makes improvements.	Surveys resulting in menu changes based on feedback.
	Emphasis on Sustainability	Increasingly important; brands demonstrating eco-friendliness attract loyalty.	Highlighting sustainable sourcing and practices.
Viral Marketing Strategy	Shareable Content	Engaging and entertaining; creative content encourages sharing among peers.	Humorous or innovative advertisements that go viral.
	Influencer Collaborations	Effective; builds credibility and trust through familiar faces promoting the brand.	Partnerships with popular local influencers on social media.
	Contests and Promotions	Exciting and interactive; encourages participation and boosts brand visibility.	Photo contests inviting customers to share their dining experiences.
	User-Generated Content	Positive; fosters a sense of community and enhances brand loyalty.	Customers sharing photos and reviews of their meals on social media.
	Cultural Relevance	Highly relatable; campaigns reflecting local culture resonate well with consumers.	Marketing that incorporates local themes, humor, or current events.
	Referral Programs	Encouraging; rewards for sharing can motivate consumers to promote the brand.	Discounts or freebies offered for referrals to friends.
	Memes and Trends	Fun and relatable; leveraging trending topics or memes captures attention.	Ads that incorporate popular memes or viral trends specific to Malaysia.
	Shareable Content	Engaging and entertaining; creative content encourages sharing among peers.	Humorous or innovative advertisements that go viral.

6. Managerial Implications and Conclusions

A customer-centric approach in retail is the most effective way to overcome challenges related to customer journey integration, employee training, and consistency across channels. Retailers must enhance their customer-centric strategies by deeply understanding and fulfilling customer needs through personalised experiences, soliciting feedback, and making adjustments accordingly. When customers feel valued through quality service and tailored interactions, they will develop brand loyalty and satisfaction.

It is crucial for retailers to focus on creating positive customer experiences in order to foster brand loyalty. Satisfied customers are more likely to share their experiences, especially on social media, which leads to organic promotion and viral marketing. Retailers must leverage

these opportunities by creating engaging experiences that encourage customers to share their enjoyment. Authentic endorsements from happy customers will intensify brand visibility and engage potential new customers.

In summary, there's a strong connection between customer-centric practices and viral marketing in retail. Prioritising positive customer experiences will enhance brand visibility and cultivate a community of loyal customers, ultimately driving long-term success. Further research should explore these dynamics across different retail sectors to see if similar outcomes are evident.

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