

Effects of Product Differentiation Strategies on Firm Product Performance: A Case of Kenya Seed Company (KSC), Kitale

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Abstract: Firms within the same industry have been selling products that are good substitutes for each other, yet it is commonly the case that no firm within the industry sells a product that is identical to that sold by a competing firm. Product differentiation occurs within the products sold by a single seller and between the products sold by different sellers. The overall objective of this study sought to analyze product differentiation and its effects on a firm's performance using the Kenya Seed Company as the case study. The specific objective of the study was to determine the effects of product differentiation in the firm's strategic approach to management. Simple random sampling was used in selecting customers and KSC staff while purposive sampling was used in selecting agents. A total of 140 questionnaires were distributed with 125 being answered correctly and fully. Data was analyzed using SPSS, Excel and correlations obtained among independent variables. The customer's trend has grown tremendously over the last 15 years which is reflected by the growth in agent's base too. ASK shows provide the most important marketing strategy for KSC. The research recommends that KSC to increase market penetration by increasing agents and enhancing field days in the remote ASAL and highland areas which still plant indigenous maize seeds.

Keywords: Competing firm, Firm's performance, Good substitutes, Product differentiation, Strategic approach to management.

1. INTRODUCTION

Product differentiation is a competitive business strategy whereby firms attempt to gain a competitive advantage by increasing the perceived value of their products and services relative to the perceived value of other firm's products and services (Rahman, 2011). Product differentiation is prevalent throughout the financial world. Within most production zones, a wide range of differentiated products are available in the market place. This is evident when one walks into a store. One encounters different products for instance milk which comes in different varieties like fresh milk, mala and yoghurt all being sold by different companies. A seed sale unit for example a seed agent has different seed types which come from different companies. According to Rodney Michael (2010), a homogeneous product is one that cannot be distinguished from competing products from different suppliers. The opposite of a homogeneous product is a differentiated product.

Dirisu *et al.*, (2013) state that while there are numerous ways to differentiate brands, identifying meaningful product-driven differentiators can be especially fruitful in gaining and sustaining a competitive advantage. Firms in the same industry, for example the seed industry, produce products that differ in performance and/or quality leading to production

of low cost/low quality seed products or higher cost/high quality seed products. Often the same firm will sell a range of different products that differ in performance or quality and even service support from the seed producers. For example, Kenya Seed Company has different maize seed varieties that differ in performance for instance H614, H6210, H6213, H6218 and H629 (iKilimo.org, 2014).

Statement of the Problem:

Business firms worldwide have attempted to imitate products of their competitors or make slight changes to their products to convince or confound their customers. This may bear fruits in a short run but the long term effects may not realize the intended objective. Product differentiation in business is not given by nature, but a firm's choice for the purpose of enhancing its business performance. Most firms have had their market share dwindle or fail to grow because of challenges in product differentiation and lack of strategies to enhance product differentiation. Seed companies are closing in on Kenya Seed Company with the market leadership being reduced by a high percentage (Kenya Seed Company July 2012 Journal). This calls for the assessment of differentiation strategies as used by Kenya Seed Company against her competition to find out the effects on the firm's performance.

General objective:

To analyze product differentiation and how this affects a firm's performance a case study of Kenya Seed Company – Kitale.

Specific objective:

To determine the effects of product differentiation in the firm's strategic approach to management

Significance of the Study:

The seed producers in Kenya at large will be the key beneficiaries of the research study because they will learn more on product differentiation on homogeneous products and how this may affect a firm's performance. The players in the seed industry will also appreciate the value of good and healthy competition among the firms dealing with identical products

Product Differentiation in Kenya Seed Company: Is it Necessary?

This poses the question, is the influence of market orientation stronger in specialty markets with minimal levels of differences in product features and customer needs/applications, compared to commodity markets? The customers are the central factor when it comes to product differentiation followed by the market orientation which influences product success in the market, product quality and customer retention. Although market orientation had no influence on performance in the commodity segment, there is an indication that smaller firms may need a higher level of market orientation to compete with large firms emphasizing low-cost advantages (Pelham, 1997).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework:

The study will apply the discrete choice theory of product differentiation which will lead to its probability based on experimental evidence and conceptual analysis.

2.1.1. Discrete Choice Theory of Product Differentiation:

According to Anderson *et al.*, (1992), product differentiation - in quality, packaging, design, color, and style - has an important impact on consumer choice. This also provides a rich source of data that has been largely unexplored because there has been no generally accepted way to model the information available. This study will show that an understanding of product differentiation is crucial to understanding how modern market economies function and that differentiated markets can be analyzed using discrete choice models of consumer behavior. It provides a valuable synthesis of existing, often highly technical work in both differentiated markets and discrete choice models and extends this work to establish a coherent theoretical underpinning for research in imperfect competition. Many of the product differentiation models are considered to be of the discrete choice form. An advantage of these models is that they build demand from a well-specified utility for the characteristics of products. An unfortunate restriction towards discretion is that they usually constrain each consumer to consider buying at most one unit of a good.

2.2.1. Product Differentiation in Businesses:

Murphy (2007) stated that successful differentiation has three aspects: commanding a premium price for a product, increasing sales because of additional buyers won over by the differentiating features and gaining buyer loyalty to its brand. According to the author, a product is differentiated if consumers perceive it to have properties, which make it distinct from rival products or services, and ideally unique in some particular way and difficult to emulate. When looking at product differentiation, it is correct to state that it is not given by nature. The main agents behind the introduction of product differentiation are the business firms themselves. There are times that businesses are forced to reduce the extent of product differentiation which also affects the profit margin of the business firms. Firms try to introduce same features like their competitors if they discover that consumers like some particular feature in the product they sell with an aim of boosting their sales. By firms dealing with products with same features, the extent of product differentiation may fail because it would be a greater challenge to differentiate the same. For example, when Kenya Seed Company came up with hybrid seeds that could give better yields, dressed with both insecticides and fungicides for protection against pests and disease with an International Code for seed dressing and availing their seeds throughout the country via their branches and an elaborate network of agents and that display the Kenya Seed Company logo, other seed companies followed suit and added the same features to their seeds and began the production of hybrid seeds. This affects the choice of farmers who find no difference in the seeds hence affecting the extent of differentiation.

2.2.2. Product Differentiation Strategies Used by Business Organizations:

Due to the intense competition in local and international markets, there is a crop of more demanding, more assertive clients, coupled with the advancement of technology, that has placed great pressure on business organizations which has sought to seek ways to achieve a sustained competitive advantage. Product differentiation in businesses occurs when products sold within the same industry have many small, and sometimes large, differences. Product differentiation occurs within the products sold by a single seller and between the products sold by different sellers. The seed industry however proves to require a more tactical approach when it comes to product differentiation due to the homogeneous nature of products, that is, the seeds, dealt within the industry.

David Stokes (1985) states that there are however several strategies that business firms apply in order to assume product differentiation in the market Stokes (1997) stated that established suppliers build up loyalty with customers who identify with their particular product. This differentiation takes a considerable investment in time (to prove the reliability and quality of a product) and money (on branding, advertising, packaging) and therefore represents a significant barrier for any new entrant to overcome. He further states that companies have attempted to overcome this barrier to entry by using the loyalty to the brand name of a product in one market to enter a different market. To achieve competitive advantage in the market, it is necessary that firms pursue strategies, which are difficult for competitors to copy. Product differentiation provides firms in the seed industry with the opportunity to make them more competitive and productive. Some of the strategies that most businesses apply in order to achieve product differentiation are as by:

By exploiting the gains of differentiation business organizations invest on attributes by customers. This decision is heralded by carrying out a consumer survey to ascertain the specific differentiating attributes valued by the clients to a given product, (Stokes, 1985).

Another key strategy is the price which is a major concern by the consumers of a given product. Business organizations strive to strike a balance between qualities of product vis-à-vis the price of the same product. There is however the government factor which regulates the retail prices making competition based on price unsustainable in the industry.

Other differentiating strategy factors include the services offered to the customers, that is, how one treats their clients in the business, quality of service offered, is it better than their competitors? These strategies, when put in place correctly, will influence consumer perceptions and attitudes towards specific products and this will eventually affect a firm's performance in the market.

Within the seed producing sector in Kenya, it is becoming increasingly apparent that firms struggle to compete on a low cost basis; favoring strategies of differentiation Kenyan seed producing firms tend to seek competitive advantage by producing products with more valued features, such as product quality, product flexibility or reliable delivery to the farmers around the region.

In the seed industry, all consumers prefer the best quality, all else being equal; thus all consumers have the same ranking of a product's variants. Consumers' choices depend on their preferences; therefore, if all the variants of a product are sold at the same price, there will be a positive demand for all of them.

According to Jermias, (2008) quoting Miller's work stated that this differentiation strategy requires the development of goods or unique services from unmatched by relying on customer loyalty to the brand. A company can be offered higher quality, performance or unique features that each of them can justify the higher prices. Miller (1987) argued that product differentiation leads to firms investing heavily in research and development activities in order to increase their innovative capability and enhance their ability to keep up with their competitors' innovations.

2.2.3. The Effect of Product Differentiation on Firms Performance:

According to Baum and Mezias (1992) – Researchers in strategic management, agree that a firm may face less competition by differentiating itself from others. From a population ecology perspective, the finite nature of the environment is such that firms occupy a distinct niche and compete for essential resources. From this point of view, a firm out-competes its competitors only when it locates itself in a niche where it possesses exclusive access to the resources it requires for survival. This ecological approach to competition assumes that the market has finite level resources. Subsequent research that adopts this ecology perspective thus argues that organizations compete more intensely when their resource requirements are similar, (Ibid). From this perspective, a firm can avoid competition for limited resources by departing from densely populated regions or differentiating itself from its competitors. Another stream of research that emphasizes the benefits of being different derives from the resource-based theory perspective. In this view, it is essential for a firm to preoccupy valuable, non-substitutable, rare, and inimitable resources in order to sustain its competitive advantage over its competitors (Barney, 1991). Because of their very nature, rare and inimitable resources require that a firm exploit and deploy them in a unique way compared to its market competitors; in other words, the way a firm operates in the market differentiates it from its competitors. Since successful strategies are more likely to be imitated (Haveman, 1993) and mimetic behaviours can arise under conditions of uncertainty (Cyert and March, 1992; Di Maggio and Powell, 1983), a successful firm's rare and inimitable resources are always at risk of being imitated by its competitors. Therefore, a firm should constantly strive to differentiate itself from its competitors and seek rare and inimitable resources with which to sustain its competitive advantage.

2.3. Core Competence:

Hamel 1994 posits that most firms have competence, but what is really needed here is to identify them and decide on how best to leverage them against opportunities. For example Kenya Seed Company has developed the competency in producing hybrid varieties that is fit for all market segments.

2.3.1. Technology:

Once an organization has acquired competence in making a certain product, it can maximize productivity by procuring the latest and modern technology. Ohmae (1985) describes Japan as unforgiving economy, where thousands of corporations go out of business every year as a result of failing to invest in new technological innovation. A company determines ultimately whether or not competitive advantage is created and sustained. This depends on the human resource practices adopted within the organization. People are able to create and implement strategies in a supportive culture. It is not a marketing practice to identify and interact with very precise target markets. Traditionally, marketers who gain processing efficiencies, create databases, and perform various forms of customer analysis have used technology Heine *et al.*, (2003). Marketing automation is the next logical step, because it helps one to do something with that insight.

2.3.2. Leadership Styles:

According to Dubrin, (2011), leadership is the process of persuasion, where an individual induces a group to pursue certain objectives. One aspect of effective leadership involves restructuring organizational architecture in a manner that motivates employees with the relevant knowledge to initiate value-enhancing proposals and firms need to 'think out of the box' in designing differentiation strategies. The author posits that differentiation is an expression of creativity of individuals and groups within firms and is limited only to opportunities that exist, or that can be created, in a particular industry and ability of firms to creatively explore ways to take advantage of those opportunities. He further states that this ability can only be achieved if organizations have an enabling leadership that empowers their followers to go for exemptions on aspects such as being visionary and a team player in all that takes place. Drucker (1994) stated that

environmental scanning analysis that depicts leadership as that, which should manage the fundamentals like people, inflation among others. He further states that strategic leadership should ensure that values and culture within an organization are appropriate for satisfying key success factors. This should lead to environmental-value-resources (E-V-R) congruence. Organizations should develop cross functional teams; Firms should explore factors outside the firm’s usual perspective e.g. customer attitudes, new technologies, industry trends. The differentiation strategy – like customer preference for a reusable pack – for example tin, gunny bags as an incentive to purchase product, appeals to a sophisticated or knowledgeable consumer interested in a unique quality product or service and willing to pay a higher price for these non-standardized products (Flower, 1999).

2.3.3. Marketing:

The seed companies in Kenya need to acquire markets that provide more avenues for more sales through various forms of promotion and distribution. This acts as a window for the firms and should be strategic in capturing all important information that can be fed back on tastes and preferences of various customers. For example, Kenya Seed Company, a differentiator that continually innovates with new products to keep customer’s interest, builds and managers customer relationships. From customer orders, Kenya Seed has competitive intelligence that predicts trends and behaviour to better manage targeted clients. The key strategy for the company is to using the tactic of leveraging a diverse workforce to build market share. It also encompasses working with other seed producing firms like the Simlaws Seeds to do business with them as opposed to waiting until competitors close in.

2.3.4. Environment:

Porter, in his work (1985), stated that firms can take a variety of actions to influence these perceptions. He further alludes that 5 forces of competition that emanates from the environment determine competition in the market. As a result of these forces, the concept of differentiation was curved out to bring more prosperity in markets. Chamberline coined in organizational competences, personnel, leadership, finances, to bring out a differentiated product that can be more competitive to make them gain more competitive advantage. They argue that a well-established organization, with well trained and motivated personnel can be able to initiate strategies that can effectively be sustained. The driving forces manifest this concept, which may be from suppliers (Maylor, 2007).

2.4 Conceptual Framework:

The research adopts a conceptual framework based on literature from Murphy, 2007. This conceptual framework assumes an ideal state of the market that other firms have not imitated nor rebranded as the newly differentiated firm that has got customers’ trust and market dominance. Agents, customers and retailers play a vital role in market dominance, besides and giving feedback to the firm over what is needed by them. In the below concept the agent and the stockiest target both the customer and in return gain market access with either a homogenous or differentiated product. The customer will either accept or not accept the product based on their trust and the brand image and in return affects the market dominance of the product which the firm gets a feedback with low market turnover either immediately or through the agents and stockiest this warrants the firm to produce a differentiated product with the aim of gaining greater market dominance over its rivals.

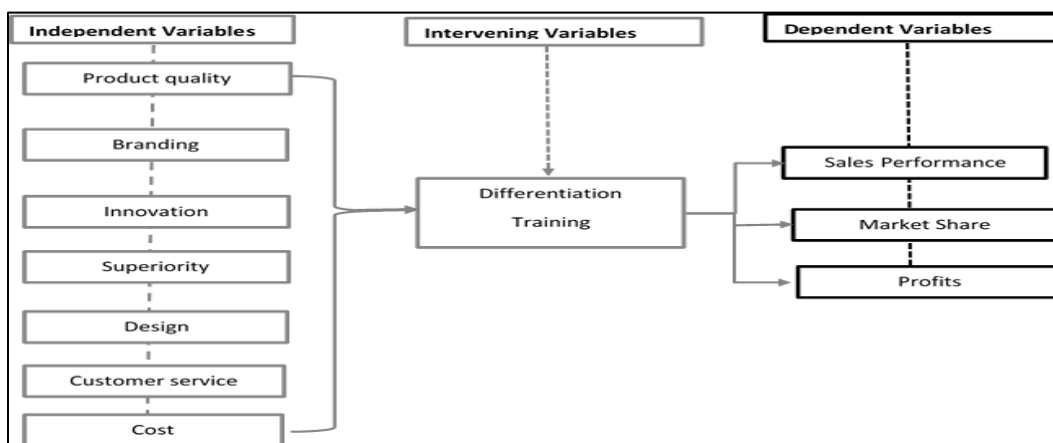


Figure 0.1: Conceptual Framework

Summary:

Product differentiation explains and resolves some other contradictory results that obtain when products are assumed to be perfect substitutes. The review above confirms that there is an existence of positive significant relationship between product differentiation and a firm’s performance and its sales growth. However, in Kenya Seed Company, there is still some ambiguity regarding the conventional differentiation strategies such as p rice, product, quality and distribution and other non-direct strategies. It is the latter that constitute the knowledge gap this research needs to explore.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey method which was efficient in collecting large amounts of information within a short time. The study was carried out in Kenya Seed Company and the target population included the firm’s agents/Stockist and customers in Trans Nzoia and neighbouring counties of West Pokot, Elgeyo Marakwet, Uasin Gishu and Bungoma with A sample size of 150 respondents. The study used simple random sampling procedure because it is considered the simplest, most convenient and bias free selection method. The data was analyzed using graphs and pie charts. All these procedures will enable the researcher to make comparison and draw valid conclusions. IBM SPSS and Microsoft Office Excel will be used to analyze the date and produce outputs.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Seed acquisition trend:

Customers of Kenya Seed Company expressed their views on Kenya Seed Company; the customers comprised of various regions .Kitale had the highest number of representatives in customers representing 15.4% of the total customers who bought seeds from KSC. Makutano and Sibanga represented 7.7% each while others were less than 5% customer representation.

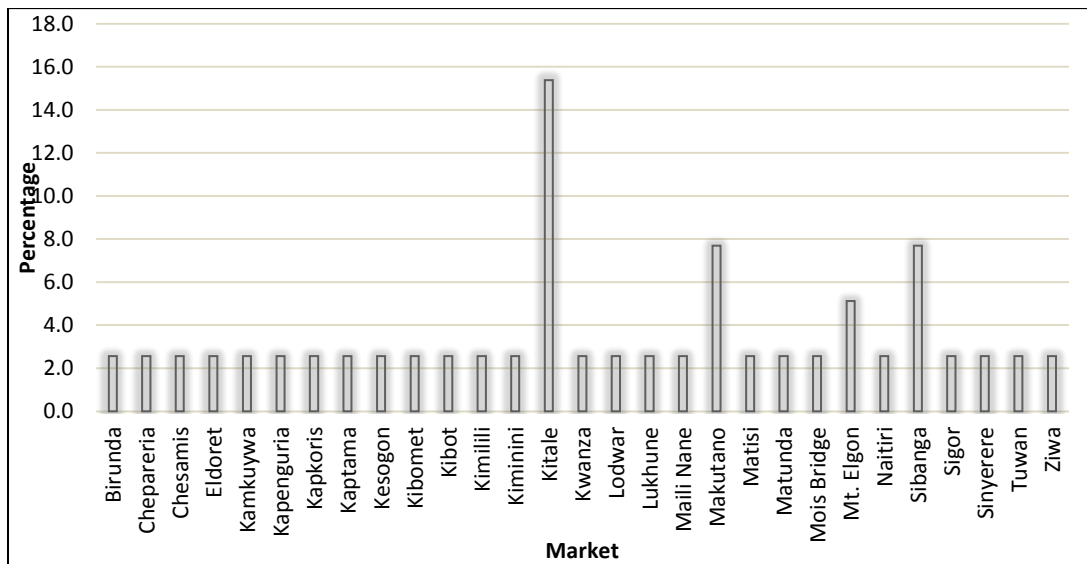


Figure 0.2: Customer Market representation

The highest representation by customers who are from Kitale shows the deep rooted penetration and believe in Home based Company. The farmers expressed their view and most of the Kitale based customers had quality and yield as their driving force to purchasing KSC seeds. Despite Kitale having lots of Seed companies the farmers for a long duration of time purchased their seeds from the company and this reaffirms their belief in Kenya Seed Company. Makutano and Sibanga lie on a radius of less than 45km from Kitale town and these two had the second highest number of customers. These zones are in the Cherangani hills and for quite a long time they have been depending on KSC products due to its quality and yield. This could also be due to its proximity to Kitale and the sense that their geographical zones with the seed growing fields are same and the seeds will adopt and thrive well in their zones.

4.2. Customer usage of KSC Products:

The duration most farmers have been using KSC products ranges from 10-15 years with a similar percentage of customers ranging from 5-10 years and greater than 20 years. This broad 10-15 years base could be explained by the breakthrough of KSC in 1990s when food production was dismal due to use of uncertified seeds by farmers due to poor distribution or lack of information on KSC.

Table 0.1: Customer usage of KSC Products

YEARS	PERCENT
1-5 Years	10.3
5-10 Years	17.9
10-15 Years	46.2
15-20 Years	7.7
> 20 Years	17.9

4.3. Customers seed acquisition trend:

Plotting a trend line on KSC seeds product acquisition shows upward moving trend from the customers and with time in the future there will be more and more of customers who have access and use KSC products. The farmers in the 1990 used to selecting seeds from previous years harvests on their farms to avert extra cost and this compromised yields. Those who had access to the seeds back then were a small group of elites and large scale farmers.

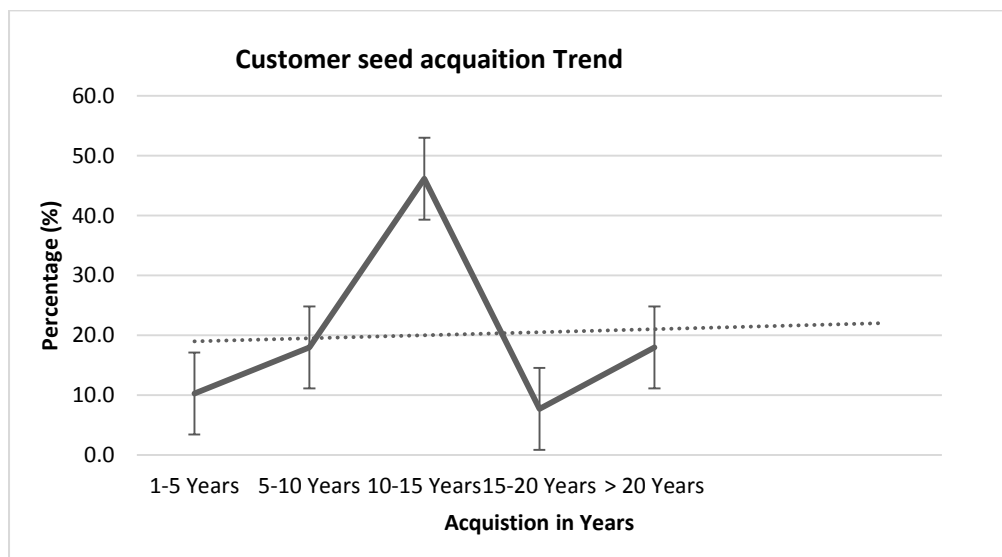


Figure 0.3: Customers seed acquisition trend

4.4. Marketing/Outreach methods:

The customers reported that most of the information they received was through ASK. They reiterated that KSC is a major key player in all Agricultural shows in the region and it recorded a 56.4% of total source of information by the customers. There was less response from customers who have derived information from road shows and through the media (Radio and Television).

Table 0.2 : KSC mode of marketing and outreach

Marketing Medium	Percent
Radio	7.7
Television	7.7
ASK Shows	56.4
Demonstration	10.3
Road shows	2.6
Field Days	15.4

The source of marketing for KSC is deemed the most effective mode of communication since it is a key team player in the Seed industry, most of the customers who heard of KSC through the Agricultural shows stated that they have been visiting the KSC stands in all Agricultural shows for not less than 15 years and they've been able to get sufficient, adequate and dynamic information from time to time. The 8% who derived new or reiterated information through the media stated that it was through short advertisements on their local Radios through key KSC personnel.

4.5 Why KSC products?

Customers were asked on why they preferred KSC products over any other Companies products and 30.8% responded that it is due to the quality of the seeds and thus good yield which represented by 28.2% on why KSC seeds were outstanding. The Kenya seed company products ranked above 12% on preference and what was outstanding were the two tests that differentiates the product with any other institution these were yield and quality. Prices fairness ranked lowly and this proofed to be a likely impediment to product market penetration hence hampering product differentiation.

Table 0.3: Customers preference to KSC Products

PREFERENCE TO KSC PRODUCTS	PERCENT
Availability	7.7
High yield	28.2
Prices	12.8
Quality	30.8
Tolerance	10.3
Variety availability	10.3

4.6 Product differentiation at KSC:

The employees were in agreement that product differentiation existed among KSC products and that's what makes their products outstanding over other seed company products. KSC staff were asked on their support of product differentiation strategies by the firm and 77.8% strongly agreed with the idea that differentiation is good and they would totally embrace it while 8/3% had an average view on adopting to a new product differentiation strategy.

Table 0.4: Staff response to support of product differentiation

Response	Percent
Average	8.3
Agree	13.9
strongly Agree	77.8

4.7 Management and product differentiation:

Seventy two percent agreed that KSC products are homogenous and outstanding in the Market. The staff also believed that much had to be done on differentiation by management it was otherwise observed that 80.6% agreed that the Management had done enough on seed differentiation. The group representing 19.6% could be existing based on the counterfeit of seeds that needs the company to work harder on marketing and pricing of their products which seems to be an impediment to KSC product differentiation.

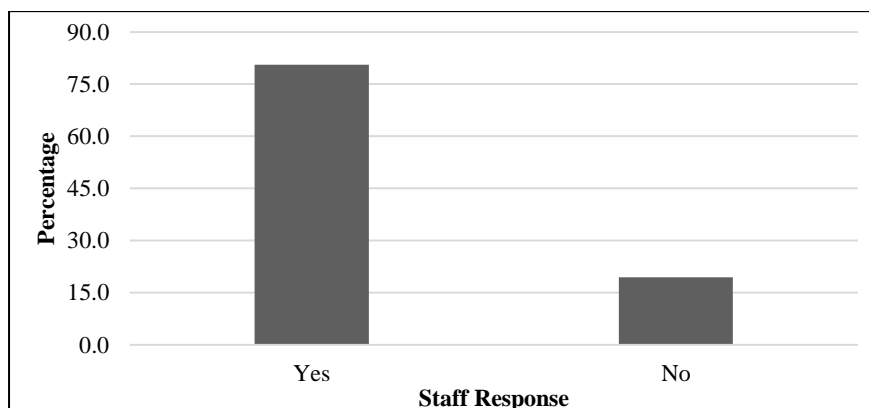


Figure 0.4: Staff response on product differentiation adequacy

4.8 Managemnt approach to differentiation:

It was observed that most of the employees strongly agree that management are keen on product differentiation and have had strategies on how to enhance product differentiation. More than 60% of the respondents agreed that management had an upper hand in enhancing homogeneity and product differentiation of the company.

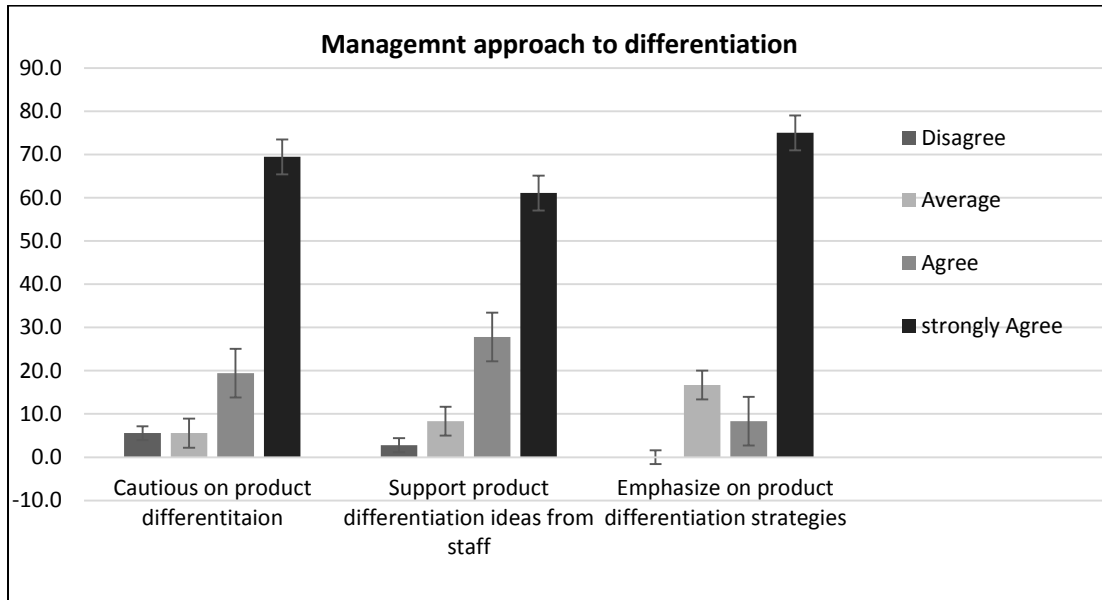


Figure 0.5: Managemnt approach to differentiation

4.9 Enhance Product differentiation strategies:

The staffs were asked on how the company could enhance its product differentiation and it was observed that Customer satisfaction through product confidence and loyalty should be built by enhancing quality and crop resistant to new diseases. The staff mentioned revisiting marketing strategies to enhance and enrich the customer base with new varieties at the facility.

Table 0.5: Enhance Product differentiation strategies

Strategy	Percentage
No strategies	41.7
Awareness on varieties	5.6
company growth	2.8
Customer satisfaction	16.7
Disease resistant crops	2.8
Easy access of seeds	2.8
Enhance Marketing	13.9
High yielding products	13.9

4.10 Determinants of product differentiation:

The factors that play a greater role in product differentiation were queried. The respondents responded with almost similar areas where the company should work to enhance uniqueness and control market share. Quality of product was ranked as the highest factor of product differentiation with KSC customers ranking it with a 48% over all other determinants. In reliability KSC staff ranked lowly forging that reliability little determined product market differentiation and while customers believed that this was a key factor in differentiation.

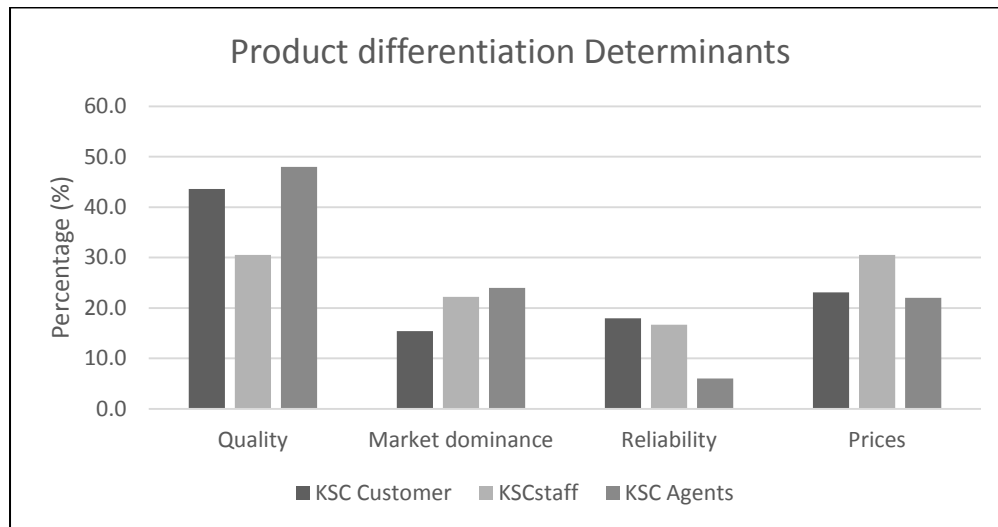


Figure 0.6: Product differentiation determinants

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Summary:

The research has demonstrated how product differentiation influences market dominance. There is still much to be done on the driving factors of product differentiation especially in the agricultural sector. The feedback that the research derived from the study shows that customers trust KSC products but the level of trust is below what would be expected of the company. There is need therefore to conduct further research on actually what farmers are looking for and what a good products means to the them/livelihoods and to their farms as a whole.

Conclusion:

The customer base of KSC showed a steady rise from 10-15 years ago and it was due to product differentiation strategies categorically product quality. The agent’s base tremendously increased for the last 10-15 years drawing a sharp correspondence with the customer’s base growth.

Recommendations:

1. The company should enhance its packaging to for uniqueness and work closely with its agents to ensure that customers/consumers are getting seeds from only authorized agents.
2. This research recommended that KSC does lots of research on this sector and enhance product differentiation.
3. This research encourages that KSC enhances this sector by increasing its market penetration through introduction of Field days in the remote areas.

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