Managing farm businesses

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN FARMERS TOWARDS THEIR FERTILIZER SUPPLIER

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Abstract

The postmodern ultra-competitive global marketplace makes it difficult for companies to hold on to customers. This is especially true for industries that are driven by commodity products, and the South African fertilizer industry is not excluded from this statement. It is therefore important that companies not only operate to create loyal customers, but also increase and maintain a high level of engagement with their customers. This study measures customer engagement for a South African fertilizer company. In doing so, the study makes use, firstly, of a proposed customer engagement model, secondly, a customer engagement questionnaire to measure engagement, and thirdly, measuring the reliability of the data. The results show that all the antecedents were regarded as important by the respondents, and all but one exceed the required 75% level of excellence. The data were tested for reliability and showed excellent reliability in excess of 0.90, as measured by Cronbach alpha. This model can be used by manager, future researchers in the fertilizer industry, as well as other agriculture related industries.

Keywords: Customer engagement, loyalty, repurchase, trust, integrity, involvement

BACKGROUND

The South African Fertilizer industry is highly competitive and is based on commodity products like urea, mono-ammonium phosphate (MAP) and potassium chloride (KCL). By blending and mixing these three products, commonly known as the "NPK blend" (Nitrogen, Phosphate, and Potassium), there are endless different NPK fertilizer combinations that could be introduced to the market according to specific needs. Fertilizers are provided either as a granular bagged product or as a liquid. Granular products are categorized as a bulk blend as well as a chemical composition and liquid fertilizer either as a suspension or a clear liquid. Product differentiations in these categories are low and fertilizer products from different suppliers are virtually identical. Nitrogen consumption by grain crops are high and companies supply products like urea and limestone ammonium nitrate (LAN) to farmers in satisfying their fertilizer needs. The South African agricultural

sector uses between 2.5-3.0 million tons of fertilizer annually (DAF, 2017:1). Maize accounts for 41% (at 3.3 million hectares of maize are cultivated) (Esterhuizen and Rubio, 2013:2) of all fertilizer sold in South Africa, followed by sugar cane (18%) (DAF, 2017:4). FertaSA (2018) indicates that the South African fertilizer industry is highly competitive, and that they have almost 800 companies registered as fertilizer producers who compete in the South African market. The major role-players in the industry are stable providers of fertilizer such as Omnia Fertilizer, Profert, Sidi Pirani, Sasol Nitro and Kynoch (FertaSA, 2018). Switching costs for a customer to move from one company to another is non-existing, and this makes it easy for competition to attract customers with low price offerings.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Engaging customers can be a competitive strategic advantage in a highly competitive business environment such as the South African fertilizer industry. Annually some (and even loyal) customers defect to competitors for reasons that are unclear. Some customers share their fertilizer purchases between two or more companies, while others purchase only from one company. How does a company retain its customers? Customers are a company`s biggest asset and they need to be cared for, their needs satisfied and good relationships need to be established to build and ultimately lead to customer loyalty and higher levels of engagement between the customer and the fertilizer company. However, how engaged are the current customer based to their fertilizer supplier? This level of engagement between the South African farmer and his/her fertilizer company needs to be determined instantiate managerial interventions to limit or even prevent them to defect to competitors. This study aims to do just that.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the study is to evaluate and determine the degree of customer engagement towards a specific fertilizer company (Omnia Fertilizer Pty. Ltd.).

This objective is achieved by the following secondary objectives:

- Performing a literature review on customer engagement;
- Compile a demographic profile of the respondents;
- Measure the importance of the customer engagement antecedents;
- Ensure reliability of the data; and to
- Draw conclusions and make recommendations to improve customer engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study population, sample and questionnaire

This study used a quantitative research design. The data were collected by using the questionnaire developed by Gallup Inc[1]. This 11-question metric of "customer engagement" measures rational formulations over 13 engagement antecedents.

The study population consisted of a group of approximately 400 grain producing farmers widely dispersed in the Eastern part of the Free State province (more specifically the Thabo Mofutsanyana Municipal District) (See Figure 1). Non-probability sampling was used to collect the data convenience and costs played a major role in sampling selection. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed at the regional monthly meetings of various farmer associations consisting of 10-15 farmers. Some 117 completed questionnaires were returned but only 110 were usable because seven questionnaires were incomplete. This resulted in an effective response rate of 73%. The data were captured and analysed by the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University.

Figure 1: Geographic map of Free State Province, South Africa
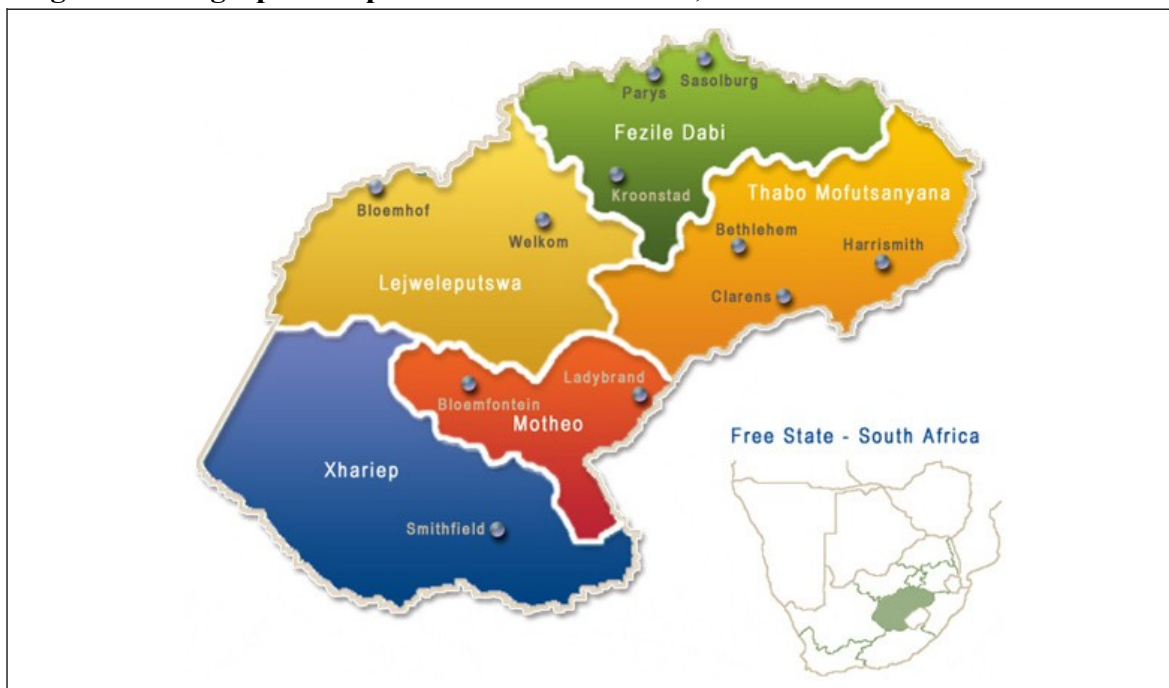
Source: Free State Tourism (2018)

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[1] Gallup, Inc maintains several registered and unregistered trademarks that include but is not limited to: CE[11].

6.   LITERATURE REVIEW

"There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer. Customers are the foundation of business and keep it in existence".

Peter Drucker (as cited by Cheales, 2008:v).

The root of business survival is the clients; building good relationships with the clients is the foundation for a business`s long-term survival (Gregory*,* 2018. Since customers are the root of business survival, holding onto a customer has never been harder – or more important (Overbey, 2018). Customer retention is an important aspect for a business. If a company can hold onto another 5% of its customers each year, total lifetime profits from a typical company will rise, on average, by 75% (Reichheld, 2001:36). Reicheld (2001:4) also warns that in a typical company, customers could defect at a rate of between 10 to 30% per year". In support of this argument, Tschohl (2013:1) stated that that businesses commonly lost 15 to 20% of their customers each year (in 2013) and that this trend still continues and that South African companies lose 10 to 25% of their customer bases per year (McQuerry, 2018).

CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Customer Engagement Definition

Numerous definitions for customer engagement exist in literature such as:

- Customer engagement explains how social relationships initiate, endure and develop over time (Gregory, 2018).
- Customer engagement is the emotional connection between a customer and a brand. (CX Dictionary, 2017).
- Customer engagement is building customer relationships that increase the customer`s commitment to a company or brand (Pataskar, 2013:3658).
- Customer engagement is the creation of a deeper more meaningful connection between the company and the customer, and one that endures over time (Kumar *et al.,* 2010:297).
- Customer engagement is a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand as well as the mechanics by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand (Bowden, 2009:65).
- Customer engagement is the level of a customer`s physical, cognitive and emotional presence in their relationship with a service organisation, thus

matching the three-partite conceptualisation of engagement widely adopted in the organisational behaviour literature (Patterson, 2013).

In summary of these definitions, customer engagement is fundamentally about a customer`s voluntary, on-going (emotional) interaction with a company and its products or services for the purpose of mutual value creation. In this regard the value those customers create for firms occur through a more elaborate mechanism than through purchase alone.

Importance of Customer Engagement

Highly engaged customers buy more, promote more, and demonstrate more loyalty (CX Dictionary, 2017). This is especially valuable in a highly competitive environment such as the fertilizer industry. Managers commonly recognise the imminent need to focus on building personal two-way relationships with customers that foster interactions (Kumar *et al.*, 2010:297). Here customer engagement centres on building upon the relations between a business and its existing consumer base along with establishing new, high-value customer relationships. Engaging with customers and forming a connection that helps to develop the value customers experience from a business, will in return, result in loyal, longer term customers that spend more money (Lacey, 2018). This corresponds with historical findings by LaMalfa (2008) who stated that: "When customers are engaged with an organization, they are emotionally connected, passionate about its products and services, as well as aligned with the purpose and direction of the organization". An emotionally engaged customer does not only depend on price shopping and discounting alone, giving a company a competitive edge in a highly competitive market (Ferrante, 2012:3) while Gallup research (2018) shows that a fully-engaged customer represents 23% more revenue than the average customer.

Contrary to engaged customers, disengaged customers mean that these customers feel no sense of loyalty, they exhibit no discernible pride in association with the brand, they have little trust in the brand or how it treats customers. What`s more, they view the brand as quite readily replaceable. In essence, they are ripe candidates for defection (Galup research, 2018). However, PeopleMetrics (2018) warns that poorly engaged employees result in disengaged customers who reduce their visits and purchases, spread the word and share their discontent with others. These disengaged customers defect to the promise of greener pastures with the end result of millions in lost revenue for a company. Exceeding

expectations is vital to customer engagement. If all you do is meet customers' needs, you will lose customers as soon as they find something better (PeopleMetrics, 2018).

Pataskar (2013:3660), Gallup research (2018) and PeopleMetrics (2018) highlight specifically six reasons why customer engagement is important, namely:

• Engaging with customers help them feel important

• Customers feel heard and understood

• Customers feel like they can come back to you with problems or for their next purchase or service need. They know they will be treated as your only customer.

• It will inspire your customers to tell their friends and associates; building a bigger community of business prospects

• It helps for overcoming objections for initial sales or service and resolving problems before they negatively impact your brand

• Support for being proactive builds confidence within the community you serve. Confidence inspires trust and attracts more business.

However, emotional engagement must be maintained or it will diminish. Managers need to take care that customer engagement is not an accidental happening at the corporate office or in the employee handbook. It must be specifically managed at the level where employees interact with customers (PeopleMetrics, 2018).

Proposed model of Customer Engagement

These survey instruments place undue emphasis on customer satisfaction and expectations scores at the expense of a more detailed examination of customers` consumption responses, which are inclusive of affective measures.

In a seminal study, Bowden (2009:72) propose that customer engagement is a more complete and conceptual process with which management may measure commitment and, hence loyalty toward a brand, service or product. The customer engagement measurement framework developed by Flynn (2012:5), and the Gallup customer engagement model (Overbey, 2018; Gallup research, 2018), have been combined and adapted to achieve the proposed customer engagement model.

6.1.4 Components of Customer Engagement

The components of customer engagement in the model are defined as explained below.

- **Trust**: In literature, trust is defined as the belief in the integrity, honesty and the reliability of another person (Sweidan et al., 2012:157). Morgan and Hunt (cited by Bowden, 2011:217) define trust as "the level of confidence in an exchange partner`s reliability and integrity and is demonstrated through relational qualities such as consistency, competency, honesty and benevolence".

- **Commitment**:The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines commitment as "the state or quality of being committed to a cause, policy, or person that restricts freedom of action" and to be committed to as "be in a long-term relationship with." In a business context, Morgan and Hunt (cited by Bowden, 2011:215), define commitment as "a customer`s enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship".

- **Confidence**: The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines confidence as "the belief that one can have faith in or rely on someone or something". According to Overbey (2018), confidence is a precursor to long-term loyalty and emotional attachment for it precedes more intense feelings of attachment and it determines whether a customer feels secure about a brand`s utility.

- **Involvement**: The main argument that Bowden (2009:68) has put forward, is that when customers are uninvolved with the choice of brand or service provider, then it is virtually impossible to have committed customers. Therefore, uninvolved and, hence uncommitted customers while being satisfied may switch brands on a regular basis because the brand or service provider is viewed as being unimportant in the customer`s decision-making process.

- **Integrity**: The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2018) defines integrity as "the quality of having strong moral principles". Consumers must believe in the brand or a company`s integrity (Pitta et al., 2006:242), and that belief is reinforced when customers feel they are dealing with a company that is not only competent and forthright but also fair and ethical (Overbey, 2018).

- **Pride**: According to Kuppelwieser *et al*. (2011:41), pride has its source in subjective knowledge and is considered to be a spontaneous nonverbal expressed emotion, such as, to be something special, be recognized and to have performed an amazing work or at least have been part of it. In the context of a business perspective, as defined by Pitta *et al*. (2006:242), pride reflects the degree to which

consumers feel appreciated by the company and proud of their personal association with the brand.

- **Passion**: A very good definition of passion, according to Albert *et al*. (2010:2) is that passion corresponds to the enthusiasm, the infatuation or even the obsession of a consumer for a brand. One of the best examples of passion, stated by Pitta *et al.* (2006:242) is, "It`s hard to surpass the consumer passion shown by Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners whose behaviour may border on obsession".

- **Loyalty**:   In a business context, Oliver (cited by Bisschoff and Moolla, 2015:214) defines loyalty as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or to patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.

- **Repurchase**: Sallam (2016:29) argues that there are only two types of people who call or come into your business; first time or returning customers. According to Bowden (2009:70), repurchase customers are viewed as having moved beyond cost-benefit, rational evaluations, and may be seeking to establish deeper on-going personal connection with the brand or experience.

- **Recommend**: In the context of this study, recommend are also considered as word of mouth. Word of mouth is well understood as a credible source of communications and plays an instrumental role in new customer acquisitions (Salam, 2016:28).

- **Share of Wallet**:   Rouse (2018) identifies share of wallet as how much of a customer's expenses for a category of product or service goes to a particular company.


RESULTS

Demographic profile

- **Gender distribution**

  The demographic profile of the respondents indicates that all the respondents are male. Although this is somewhat odd, it is not surprising because the respondents are all farmers, and the Eastern Free State is male dominant with regard to farming as profession.

- **Age distribution**

  The age distribution of the respondents is summarised in figure 2. Some 15% of the respondents are younger than 31 years, while the majority age group, 40%, is between 41 to 50 years. In fact, 58% of the respondents are older than 40 years. This correlates well with the United States of America where 75% of the grain producing farmers in is older than 47 years (Schepers, 2013). Economic realities confirm that it is extremely difficult for young people to take up farming as a career because of the high demand for invested capital and risk.
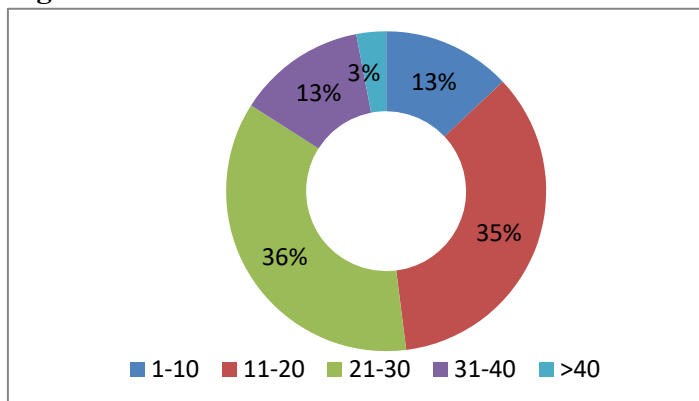
Figure 2: Age distribution of respondents
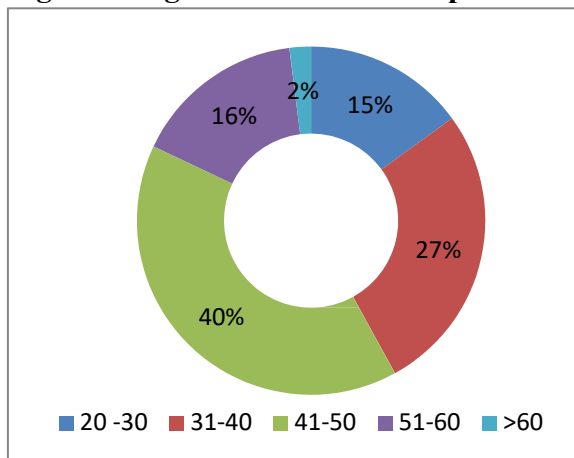
- **Farming experience**

  The years of experience as a farmer are summarised in figure 4. Some 71% of respondents have experience between 11 and 30 years. Interesting is that only 3% of the respondents have experience of more than 40 years.

Figure 3: Years as a farmer

- **Fertilizer Type**

  Another aspect of the demographics that was collected from the questionnaires was the volume of fertilizer that the respondents use. Prilled fertilizer is used by 66% of respondents while liquid fertilizer is only used by 34% of the respondents.

- **Fertilizer volume**

  The last part of the demographic information that was collected is the type of fertilizer that the respondents are using. These results are presented in figure 4, and it indicates that 50% of the respondents use 1 to 100 tons of fertilizer. Only 12% of the respondents are using more than 400 tons of fertilizer annually.

Figure 4: Volume of fertilizer
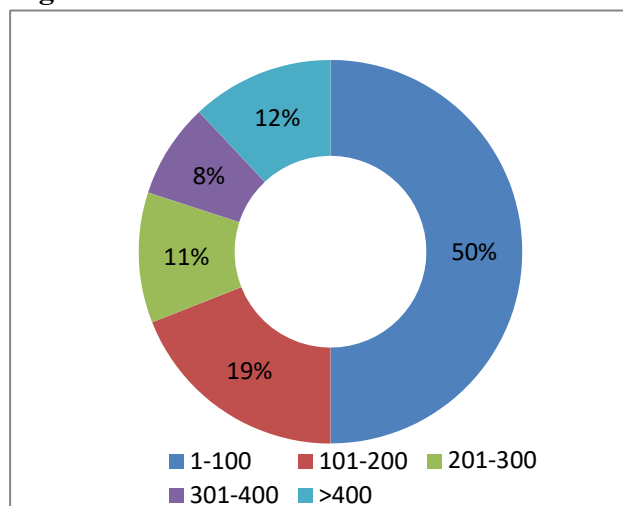
Mean Values

The data was analysed with a Microsoft Excel spread sheet in order to calculate the mean and standard deviation (STD Dev) of each contributor. In order to enhance the interpretation of the results, the mean value was calculated as a percentage for each question. Also, the mean value for each individual contributor was calculated and is presented as a percentage value. Bisschoff and Hough (1995), as applied successfully by Salim (2011:48), indicated that the percentages are interpreted as follows:

- <60%   : Lower importance; Dissatisfaction; Immediate action required.
- 60%-75%   : Important; satisfaction; Develop to become excellent.
- >75%   : Very important; Very satisfied/Excellent; Maintain to stay on top.

Since the study did not return any high standard deviation values (exceeding 1.5) are explained in the results (Salim, 2011:49).

Table 1: Mean Scores of Customer Engagement Influences

Influence	Mean %
Share of Wallet	71.75
Recommend	**75.63**
Repurchase	**75.40**
Satisfaction	72.00
Loyalty	73.81
Calculative Commitment	73.75
Affective Commitment	**75.50**
Involvement	*59.50*
Trust	70.66
Confidence	73.27
Integrity	**78.50**
Pride	**76.50**
Passion	66.72

Figure 5: Mean values of Customer Engagement Influences
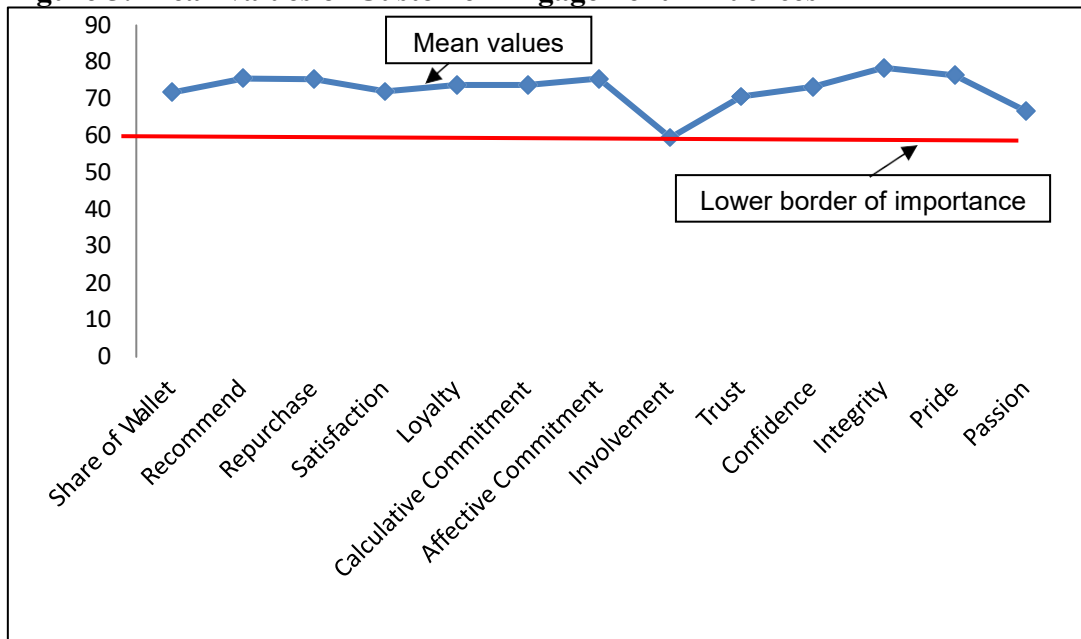
The thirteen customer engagement influences are analysed and interpreted on the principle that was set by Bisschoff and Hough (1995) (cited by Salim, 2011:48). The red line in figure 3.5 is used as a marker to indicate the minimum level of 60% satisfaction. In this regard, it is only *involvement*, at 59.5%, that falls below the satisfactory level of 60%. This means that immediate action is required to develop *involvement* to higher satisfactory levels. Furthermore, it is indicated that the influences of *Recommend, Repurchase, Affective Commitment, Integrity* and *Pride* are all at levels of >75%. Therefore, these five influences must be managed to stay on top.

It is illustrated that the remaining seven influences *Share of Wallet, Satisfaction, Loyalty, Calculative Commitment, Trust, Confidence* and *Passion* are at the level of 60%-75%. However, at 66%, *Passion* is at the lower end of the satisfaction and important scale whereas the remaining influences in this category are at the upper end (that is >70%, and <75%). This means that these influences need some managerial attention to increase the level of satisfaction.

Factor analysis

One good method of screening for efficient items is to run an exploratory factor analysis on all items contained in the survey to weed out those variables that failed to show high correlations and thereby to simplifying the data set (Field, 2009:667).

In table 2 the initial eigenvalues, extraction sums of squared loadings and rotation sums of squared loadings are summarised. The eigenvalues associated with each factor represent the variance explained by that factor. Only factors with eigenvalues, that exceed 1, according to the Kaizer criterion, were extracted (Field, 2009:6).

In total five factors have been identified. These factors explain a cumulative variance of 77% and exceeds the desired 60% variance (Kadé & Bisschoff, 2010:7) with ease. Factor 1 explained 28.17% of the variance, factor 2 explained 17.23% thereof while the other factors explained 13.45%, 9.49% and 8.44%, respectively. These factors are:

- **Factor 1: Repurchase**
  Factor 1 is the most important factor and has been identified as *repurchase*. Factor 1 explains a total variance of 28.17%. The 21 items loading onto Factor 1 point to willingness and positive recommendations, repurchase intentions, feelings of trust, reciprocity and pleasure, economic advantages, passion and proudness and lastly a willingness to maintain the relationship.

- **Factor 2: Trust**
  Factor 2 has been identified as *Trust*. There are nine items loading onto Factor 2 and they point to the concepts trust, promises, satisfaction and delighted. The total variance explained by Factor 2 is 17.23%.

- **Factor 3: Integrity**
  Factor 3 has been identified as *Integrity*. The six items loading onto Factor 3 are resolving problems fairly and satisfactorily, respect, feeling of warmth and

comfort, enjoyment of visiting experience and putting the interest of the customer first. The total variance explained by Factor 3 is 13.45%.

- **Factor 4: Involvement**

   Factor 4 has been identified as *Involvement.* The four items loading onto Factor 4 are paying attention to anything about the company, notice information related to the company, keeping up with things related to the company as well as noticing information related to the company. The total variance explained by Factor 4 is 9.49%.

- **Factor 5: Loyalty**

   Factor 5 has been identified as *Loyalty.* The two items that load onto Factor 5 are firstly; treating all customers the same independent of purchase volume and secondly, not considering switching to another fertilizer company. The total variance explained by Factor 5 is 8.55%.

Reliability of data

According to Field (2009:666), reliability comes to the forefront when variables developed from summated scales are used as predictor components in objective models. Table 2 summarises the reliability scores for the data. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient (α) is 0.987; this indicated very satisfactory reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (Field, 2009:667).

Table 2:   Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.987	48

SUMMARY

In this study, the concept of customer engagement was researched on the basis of a proposed engagement model. The aim was to determine to what degree the different influences contribute to the degree of customer engagement. The study has shown that customer engagement can be considered as a major building block in the creation of higher degrees of customer loyalty, recommendations and repurchase. Furthermore, the study shows that higher levels of customer engagement can be achieved through the important influences of trust, integrity and involvement.

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