

Customer Involvement Management Practices and Customer Retention in the Hospitality Industry

Dr. C. H. Iruka

Lecturer, Department of Marketing, University of Port Harcourt

Ateke, Brown Walter

Graduate student, Department of Marketing

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between Coaching as a component of Customer Involvement Management (CIM) practice and Customer Retention (CR) in the Hospitality industry in Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria. Data collected from a total of one hundred and forty-five (145) top level managers drawn from seventy-nine (79) luxury brand hotels were used in the final analysis. The data collected was analyzed using simple percentages, weighted averages, and graphs at the primary level of analysis, while the hypotheses were tested using the Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient (ρ). All computations were performed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 17.0. The study discovered a positive and significant relationship between coaching as customer involvement management practice and customer retention. The study therefore concluded that Coaching as a customer involvement management practice is a prerequisite for firms that seek customers not just for transactional exchanges, but also for enduring and mutually satisfying relational exchanges. It was therefore recommends that firms should put in place adequate machineries that enable the integration of the customers in their value creation and delivery processes. It was also recommended that firms should endeavor to produce products that capture the opinions and suggestions of their customers as this will bond them more to the firm.

Keywords: Coaching, Customer Involvement, Customer Retention, Hotel Brand.

1. Introduction

According to De Madariaga and Valor (2007), a key success factor in mature markets is customer retention through sustained long-term relationships. The challenge all marketers face today is finding ways of increasing customer retention, as managers have discovered that transforming indifferent customers into loyal ones and establishing long term relationships with them is critical for organizational survival (Alrubaiee and Nahl, 2010). Also, increased customer retention is frequently argued to be an important driver of organizations' long-term financial performance. Eisingerich and Bell (2007) found empirical support that customer retention emerges as the most dominant and direct determinant of a firm's long-term profitability and survival.

Globalization of markets and the influx of new hotel brands (national and international) have led to stiffer competition and the risk of reducing market shares for all players. As firms jostle for a share of the consumers' wallet and mind, they undertake myriad of activities, and contrive and implement several strategies (Ateke and Elvis, 2013), with a view to maintaining their hold on the market, hence implying that in this competitive and globalized market, the customers of each firm constitute one of the most important assets that a hospitality institution should preserve and continuously expand. As customers are of great importance, it is essential for the hotels to satisfy their needs and wants, cultivate long-term relationships with them, with a view to enjoying their continued patronage (Alrubaiee and Nahl, 2010). Over the past decades, the interest in retaining customers has increased considerably. Marketers' attention have shifted gradually from mutually independent transactions to loyalty-based repeat purchases and cross-sell opportunities (Gruen et al., 2000; DeWulf, et al., 2001; Lemon et al., 2002; Weiner, 2001), which are based mostly on relationships and customer involvement.

Customers can be involved or integrated in the firm's value creation and delivery processes in differing roles, depending on the intent of the firm or the kind of innovation the firm is pursuing (continuous or discontinuous innovation). These roles indicate the varying degrees of intimacy the firm can develop with the customer. The roles are the dimensions of Customer Involvement Management (CIM) namely, coaching, partnering, advising and reporting (Pinegar, 2000). Coaching represents a limited form of involvement where the customers are not intimately involved with the company, but only provide comments and inputs into what a new technology can or should be. In partnering, the customer is engaged in the co-development of the technology and its specific application. It is a level of involvement where the customer is intimately and actively involved with the firm from the very start of the project, and has a shared stake in ensuring the successful commercialization of the technology. Advising is a kind of role in which the customer is not exclusively tied to the project, but participates to ensure that the new technology will be able to serve their needs. Customers' involvement in this role is characterized by guiding and directing the commercialization efforts of the firm. In the reporting role, customers report on the benefits they derive from the technology and the improvements they expect to see in the

product.

Few studies exist on the concept of customer involvement and its impact on company effectiveness, especially through customer retention and loyalty. Again, most of these few studies were conducted in the developed economies (Bitner, et al, 1997), the online environment (Rohrbeck, et. al., 2010), and in the industrial products manufacturing sector (Pinegar, 2000). This paper however, is concerned with examining the relationship between coaching as customer involvement practice and customer retention in the hospitality industry in Nigeria-a developing economy.

This paper however, is concerned with examining the relationship between coaching and customer retention in the hospitality industry; and to assist in the attainment of this objective, the following research hypotheses are formulated:

Ho₁: There is no significant relationship between coaching and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between coaching and trust in the hospitality industry.

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between coaching and commitment in the hospitality industry.

2. Literature Review

Customer involvement covers a broad range of activities by both the customer and the firm. The least intimate form of involvement consists of the customers providing unsolicited feedback or suggestions to the organizations. At its most complex form, the customer takes on active roles such as contributing intellectually, financially or physically to the development and commercialization of technology. Integrating the customer in the innovation process is believed to be a powerful means to reduce uncertainty and failure rates and to increase the revenue from new products (Rohrbeck, et al, 2010). However, the benefits of integrating the customer in the innovation process has to be weighed against the costs; as the position of the customer has successfully changed over the last three decades from a passive recipient to an action co-designer in the creation of value (Ernst, 2004).

Customer involvement management (CIM) can be defined as the extent to which the customer is involved in the value creation and delivery process. It is the interaction and/or collaboration between channel members (including customers and users) and company personnel during the course of product development to actualize a commercial product (Ernst, 2004). Customer involvement is an approach that takes customer orientation a step further than customer relationship management. It is about identifying and developing possibilities to involve customers in the business and product development process, such as design, marketing, sales, customer service, etc. (Rohrbeck, et al, 2010). With CIM, the product is regarded as a subset in what meets the customer's need of identification, problem solving, and consumption. The possibility to influence the design and consumption itself is assumed to be of great importance for the consumers' buying decision and loyalty. Customer involvement often means nothing more than getting customers to do more of the work (Plankey, 2012).

Customer involvement in organizational activities has been recognized in operations management, organizational studies and particularly in service marketing (Bitner, et al, 1997; Gronroos, 1994). Also, the importance of customer involvement in services has long been established (Rohrbeck et al 2010; Chung, 2006). CIM has been a discourse under different captions: customer co-production (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003), customer contribution (Bitner et al, 1997), customer integration (Rohrbeck, et al 2010; Enkel, et al, 2005), customer participation (Brockhoff, 2003) customer partnership (Campbell et al, 1994; Fuller, 2007), customer interaction (Gruner and Homburg, 2000), co-designer (Ernst 2004). The varying taxonomies notwithstanding, the onus has been a conscious drive to determine the extent to which the customer takes part in the creation and delivery of value and how such participation impacts on the firm and the customer.

CIM is in effect a paradigm of the market orientation theory. However, in involvement, the customer progresses from a passive recipient of value to active participant in the value creation and delivery process. Extant literature in this domain have chiefly focused on the argument for and against customer involvement in services in relation to its impact on organizational performance and productivity, rather than focusing on the understanding of the factors affecting customer behaviour and performance during participation which will subsequently impact on organizational performance and productivity (Rohrbeck, et. al., 2010). Hence while these literature have empirically proved the importance of eliminating, minimizing or maximizing customer involvement roles in service-based firms and its impact on organizational performance and productivity, they have assumed that customers' roles and behaviour in involvement is static, unchangeable and unimprovable (Noone et al, 2003) and as a result, recommendations on organizational productivity improvement have chiefly focused on the adaptation of organizational resources, employees and service processes to customer's situation rather than understanding and improving the behaviour of customers during integration. For example, Deming (1982) emphasized the need for firms to focus on the proper specification and design of production process, which he identified as key to controlling customer behaviour. Others suggested a script-based method for service firms in controlling and managing customer behaviour during integration. However, in today's increasingly competitive market, customers have been recognized as operand resources for organizational service production (Kristenssen, et al, 2007), and have been labeled partial employees for firms.

Rohrbeck, et al (2010) perceived customer involvement as a tool from which innovation can be sourced through partnering and reporting and, consequently, the attainment of higher competitiveness and enhanced customer satisfaction and retention can be achieved, while Eisingerich and Bell, (2006) suggested that, in managing client relationships, organizations should consider the relative effectiveness of individual relationship building strategies in fostering customer loyalty, which is a precursor of customer retention. Studies of hotel services markets suggest that the use of relationship marketing can generate higher returns from customers (Alrubaiee and Nahl, 2010). Parvatiyar and Sheth (2001) consider relationship marketing to be the on-going process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-use customers to create or enhance mutual economic value at reduced cost. Implicit in this view is the idea of involving or integrating the customers in the programs and processes of the organization, with a view to making the customer an active creator of value and not just a passive receiver. Proactive and progressive firms cannot but embrace this paradigm shift in relational marketing to remain competitive and have the continued business of the customer.

Relationship marketing theory suggests that customer involvement results from certain aspects of cooperative relationships that characterize successful relational exchanges. It is also suggested that numerous factors influence involvement success. However, two antecedents consistently identified as important are market orientation (Rohrbeck, et al., 2010; Valenzuela, et al, 2010; Pinegar, 2000), and customer relationship management (Ahearne, et al, 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). It is also averred that successful customer involvement efforts improve customer retention and firm performance through stronger relational bonds (De Wulf, et al, 2001; Sirdeshmukh, et al, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, Pinegar (2000) dimensionalized customer involvement into four roles namely: coaching, partnering, advising and reporting. However, this paper dwells only on the coaching level of involvement. The coaching type of relationship takes place when there is minimal focus on use of technology and a high focus on developing a particular technology. In coaching, the organization works to develop a promising new technology that represents a discontinuous innovation (Pinegar, 2000). The firm's aim in involving the customer is to search for unfulfilled needs that the prospective technology might satisfy. By involving the customer early in the development process, an undifferentiated form of the technology would be shown to the customers for their opinion of potential application. A notable feature of coaching is the ideation of technology options to fuse emerging technology concept with potential demand opportunities (Myers and Marquis 1969), in Pinegar (2000). The success of a coaching relationship depends mostly on the ability of the organization to select a coach that has the unique mix of skills, knowledge and vision required for the particular situation and objective. Key experts, opinion leaders and technology enthusiasts would represent the caliber of candidates required (Pinegar, 2000). Coaching is most effective when it takes place in the firm's facility and during customers' visit.

The distinction of coaching is that it represents a limited relationship since customers are not intimately involved with the organization. Customers in the role of coaching only provide comments and inputs into what a new technology can or should be; there is no further relationship sought (Rohrbeck, et al, 2010). An example of coaching is when experts or key customers are brought in to help conceptualize a radically new technology or to assist in forming a list of possible avenues for leapfrogging current technologies.

3. Methodology

A purposefully designed questionnaire was used to collect the data required for this study. Respondents were required to tick from 1-5 on a likert scale, where 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly Agree. A total of one hundred and seventy (170) copies of the questionnaire were administered to top management staff of seventy nine (79) luxury hotels brands in Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria. Of the 170 copies of the questionnaire administered, only one hundred and forty-five (145), representing seventy-seven percent (77%) were found usable, and were actually used for the study. The Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient (ρ) was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance in a two-tailed test.

4. Results

The test of H_{01} indicated a positive relationship between coaching and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. The test generated 0.882** in the Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficient, which means that a very strong relationship exists between coaching and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Based on this result, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted.

The test of H_{02} indicated a positive correlation between coaching and trust in the hospitality industry. The test result generated a correlation coefficient of 0.856** which imply that a very strong relationship exist between coaching and trust in the hospitality industry. Consequently, this study rejects the null hypothesis; and accepts the alternate hypothesis.

Based on the test of H_{03} , it was discovered that a positive relationship exists between coaching and commitment in the hospitality industry. The test result generated a 0.789** score in the Spearman Rank Order Correlation

Coefficient, which means that a strong relationship exists between coaching and commitment in the hospitality industry. It is on the basis of this result that this study rejects the null hypothesis and accepts the alternate hypothesis.

5. Discussion

Based on the result of the test of hypothesis one H_{01} , it was discovered that a very strong and positive correlation exists between coaching and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. This discovery is justified by the fact that customers who have the opportunity of giving the firm ideas on how to serve them better usually have the psychological satisfaction that their experiences are valued by the firm, more especially when the customer observes the actual implementation of such ideas so given. The apparent dearth of previous research involving these variables to lend supportive or contradictory evidence to this discovery notwithstanding, this finding adequately coheres with practically observable consumer dispositions, and therefore, can be seen or termed as providing information that is consistent with acceptable knowledge.

H_{02} of this study speculated that there is no significant relationship between coaching and trust in the hospitality industry. However, the test of hypothesis proved the falsity of that speculation as the test result indicated a very strong positive relationship between the variables.

In view of the test score of 0.789 produced by H_{03} , this exploration inferred that there is a strong positive relationship between coaching and commitment. This conclusion is hinged on the fact that the score is well above 0.50 which is the required minimum score for a result to be accepted as significant in a test. This study therefore posits that there is significant relationship between coaching and commitment in the hospitality industry. There is obviously no existing literature from which to seek corroboration or denial of the truth of this finding as the subject has not attracted much attention. However, real life observation of customers and their disposition toward firms may suggest that firms which value customers' unsolicited ideas and suggestions will enjoy the continued business of the customers, since the customers will like to remain with the firm to enjoy the product of their ideas and suggestions, thus exhibiting a form of commitment to the firm.

On the basis of the test results obtained, this study posits that there is a significant relationship between coaching and customer retention. This is so because making the customer a participant in the creation and delivery of value gives him not only a psychological boost, but also a sense of importance and self-worth which can affect the way he perceives the firm and its services. This position is shared with Pinegar (2000) and Dadfar (2009), albeit in industrial marketing; Johra and Mohammed (2012), who found a similar relationship in the banking sector in Bangladesh; and Rohrbeck, et al. (2010) who also discovered a similar relationship, but in the online environment.

With such satisfaction achieved, the level of risk of new product failure is reduced. This position agrees with that of Enkel, et al. (2005), who averred that customer integration into the innovation process is about to become a best practice. They suggested that the lead-user approach has proven to be especially valuable when reducing discontinuous innovation's market risk.

6. Conclusion

Coaching as a customer involvement management practice has positive and significant relationship with customer retention through customer satisfaction, trust and commitment. Customer involvement is therefore a necessary prerequisite for firms that seek customers not just for transactional exchanges; but also for enduring and mutually satisfying relational exchanges. Winning new customers is a healthy and profitable business phenomenon. However, maintaining and retaining existing customers is thrice healthier and more profitable for the business enterprise. Therefore, firms which crave higher rates of customer retention, which engenders greater profit and less marketing expenses, must look to customer involvement management, as customer participation in the value creation and delivery process may lead to greater customer satisfaction (Czepiel, 1990). Through effective customer involvement management practices, firms will be able to source new product ideas that can culminate into value offerings that effectively satisfy the needs and wants of the customers and contribute to the overall success of the business firm.

By participating in new product development, the customer can monitor the firm's fulfillment of the service contract (Larsson and Bowen, 1989). In this context, customers are led to believe or feel that they are able to influence the firm to incorporate certain product features that have some special value for them (Kaulio, 1998). This Believe will then drive the customer into a commitment with the firm which will ultimately lead to a long term relationship.

As companies are increasingly rethinking the fundamental ways in which they generate ideas and bring them to market, they should exploit the coaching roles of customers as a way of harnessing external ideas while also leveraging their in-house research and design efforts, since research and design has long been a costly and inexact process (Thomke and Von Hippel, 2002; Chesbrough, 2003). Customer involvement is increasingly being seen in management rhetoric as a means to tighten the feedback loop between the cycles of consumption

and production (Foxall, 1989; Gales and Mansour-Cole, 1995). Underlying most such views is the assumption that customers are sources of information and of knowledge (Von Hippel, 1988; Normann and Ramirez, 1994) and that customer involvement can enhance product concept effectiveness (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995).

7. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study, the inferences made; it can be professed that adequately designed, planned and implemented customer involvement practice is an indispensable precondition for achieving higher customer retention rates. With a view to inspiring firms to achieve their aim of establishing and nurturing efficient long-term customer relationships, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. Firms should put in place adequate machineries that will enable the integration of the customers in their value creation and delivery processes.
2. Firms should endeavor to appreciate the individual differences in their customers so as to be able to determine the involvement roles to integrate them into.
3. Firms should endeavor to produce products that capture the opinions and suggestions of their customers as this will bond them more to the firm.
4. Firms should create the necessary organizational infrastructure and the enabling environment to encourage customers to participate in their value creation and delivery process.

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Appendices
Frequencies on Items of Coaching

This firm solicit the opinion of customers when designing new products or modifying existing ones

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	1	.7	.7	.7
Disagree	10	6.9	6.9	7.6
Neutral	74	51.0	51.0	58.6
Agree	18	12.4	12.4	71.0
Strongly Agree	42	29.0	29.0	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

In this firm, customers' comments are valued and encouraged

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	16	11.0	11.0	11.0
Neutral	58	40.0	40.0	51.0
Agree	21	14.5	14.5	65.5
Strongly Agree	50	34.5	34.5	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

This firm use customers' complaints to improve its product offerings

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	20	13.8	13.8	13.8
Neutral	48	33.1	33.1	46.9
Agree	37	25.5	25.5	72.4
Strongly Agree	40	27.6	27.6	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

In this firm, we ask customers for suggestions on how to improve our products

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	8	5.5	5.5	5.5
Neutral	67	46.2	46.2	51.7
Agree	39	26.9	26.9	78.6
Strongly Agree	31	21.4	21.4	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Frequencies on Items of Customer Care Analysis Customer Satisfaction

Customers of this firm often report that its products meets their expectation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	10	6.9	6.9	8.3
Neutral	70	48.3	48.3	56.6
Agree	17	11.7	11.7	68.3
Strongly Agree	46	31.7	31.7	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm believe that the product offering is commensurate with the money they spend

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	19	13.1	13.1	14.5
Neutral	58	40.0	40.0	54.5
Agree	20	13.8	13.8	68.3
Strongly Agree	46	31.7	31.7	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm usually display that they are completely happy with our products

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	1	.7	.7	.7
Disagree	22	15.2	15.2	15.9
Neutral	53	36.6	36.6	52.4
Agree	32	22.1	22.1	74.5
Strongly Agree	37	25.5	25.5	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Often, customers of this firm express how much the products of the firm exceed their expectation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	14	9.7	9.7	11.0
Neutral	68	46.9	46.9	57.9
Agree	33	22.8	22.8	80.7
Strongly Agree	28	19.3	19.3	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Frequencies on Items of Customer Care Analysis Trust

Customers of this firm have the confidence that its products will always meet their expectation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	14	9.7	9.7	11.0
Neutral	70	48.3	48.3	59.3
Agree	21	14.5	14.5	73.8
Strongly Agree	38	26.2	26.2	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm believe that their interest will always be protected in their dealings with the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	15	10.3	10.3	10.3
Neutral	55	37.9	37.9	48.3
Agree	30	20.7	20.7	69.0
Strongly Agree	45	31.0	31.0	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm usually rely on the integrity of the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	16	11.0	11.0	11.0
Neutral	59	40.7	40.7	51.7
Agree	41	28.3	28.3	80.0
Strongly Agree	29	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm have the confidence that neither the firm nor its staff will exploit them

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	7	4.8	4.8	4.8
Neutral	81	55.9	55.9	60.7
Agree	33	22.8	22.8	83.4
Strongly Agree	24	16.6	16.6	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Frequencies on Items of Commitment

Customers of this firm do exhibit that they are willing to have continued relationship with the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	8	5.5	5.5	6.9
Neutral	82	56.6	56.6	63.4
Agree	12	8.3	8.3	71.7
Strongly Agree	41	28.3	28.3	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm do tolerate minor inconveniences in order to keep their relationship with the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	19	13.1	13.1	14.5
Neutral	72	49.7	49.7	64.1
Agree	17	11.7	11.7	75.9
Strongly Agree	35	24.1	24.1	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm have shown that they are willing to have long-term relationship with the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	1	.7	.7	.7
Disagree	22	15.2	15.2	15.9
Neutral	65	44.8	44.8	60.7
Agree	25	17.2	17.2	77.9
Strongly Agree	32	22.1	22.1	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Customers of this firm have always shown their dedication to the firm

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Disagree	2	1.4	1.4	1.4
Disagree	14	9.7	9.7	11.0
Neutral	80	55.2	55.2	66.2
Agree	27	18.6	18.6	84.8
Strongly Agree	22	15.2	15.2	100.0
Total	145	100.0	100.0	

Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Coaching and Customer Satisfaction

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Coaching	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Coaching	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.882**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	145	145
	Customer Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.882**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	145	145

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Coaching and Trust

Correlations

Type	Variables	Statistics	Coaching	Trust
Spearman's rho	Coaching	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.856**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	145	145
	Trust	Correlation Coefficient	.856**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	145	145

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Coaching and Commitment

Correlations

Type	Variables1	Statistics	Coaching	Commitment
Spearman's rho	Coaching	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.789**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	145	145
	Commitment	Correlation Coefficient	.789**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	145	145

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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