

# Customer Focus and Performance of Agricultural firms listed at the Nairobi Security Exchange, Kenya

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**Abstract:** This research sought to determine the influence of customer focus as a total quality management tool on performance of agricultural firms listed in the Nairobi Securities Exchange, Kenya (NSE). Customer focus was identified on the basis of feedback systems, customer complaints handling and customer retention whereas performance was measured based on productivity, effectiveness and employee satisfaction. The theories that guided the study included; quality improvement and Crosby's approach theories. The research adopted descriptive research design where the target population of the study comprised of all the seven agricultural firms listed on the NSE. The analysis of the study was done using multiple regression models where SPSS was used. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and was presented using tables, charts and graphs. The study found out that customer focus had a positive and significant effect on the performance of Agricultural Firms Listed at the NSE, Kenya. The study recommended that customer focus should be the focus of managers as this is key in influencing firm performance. Specifically the study recommends a more serious focus on improving quality of services to sustain the customer base as well as taking the customer complaints more promptly.

**Keywords:** Customer focus, Total Quality Management, Performance of Listed Agricultural firms.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

Worldwide, the business environment is dynamic as it is characterized by, increasing demanding customers, quality is now the most significant element in competitive advantage strategies businesses (Ismyrlis & Moschidis, 2015). Over the years, organizations have been pushing towards strategies to incorporate the ever changing business trend in order to achieve and sustain market share. All over the world, firms hope to achieve expansion and growth in the future and increase organizational performance. Organizational performance relates to a number of factors which include production, income, ability to compete, decrease in expenses, less errors, minimum level of scrap, and secured businesses (Sajjad & Amjad, 2012; Akhtar, Zameer & Saeed, 2014).

Whereas the idea of TQM has been embraced in the developed countries, there is still a lot to be done in Africa in as far as TQM implementation is concerned (Djerdjour and Patel, 2010). Countries in Africa which includes Kenya are home with ISO standards. ISO certification applies to any organizational setting which includes the agricultural sector where it drives performance improvement (Wanyoike, 2016). Customer focus is a quality management practice that keeps a firm in the know-how of emerging trends in the business which task them to make the needed changes and improvements accordingly (Ikay & Aslan, 2011). To create a competitive advantage depends on the level which an organization surpasses its rivals, thus, operational processes should be well undertaken (Panuwatwanich & Nguyen, 2017). In order for growth objectives to be attained by organizations, quality products must be provided which will meet the preferences and needs of customers (Javed, 2015). Therefore, TQM is an appropriate approach which ensures that quality products are made to adequately address the needs of final consumers and the firm remains competitive in an ever-aggressive global market.

The prominence of customer focus stems from the fact that customer tastes and preference change with time, therefore customer focus identifies those changes and thus, ensures continuous patronage. Similarly, continuous patronage by customers ensures stability in performance of firms (Psomas & Kafetzopoulos, 2012). Customer focus is yet to receive the kind of attention it deserves specifically in the agricultural sector. Most studies have been focused on the financial and public sector. The poor performance of firms in the agricultural sector of Kenya has been largely due to inefficient total quality management. The firms within the agricultural sector are not performing according to the customer expectations; a pointer towards proper lacy of customer service, this has translated into reduced earnings per share (NSE Market data,2015).

The poor performance has thus become an impetus for proper examination of the TQM practices and compliance to these practices more specifically customer focus. For this reason, this study sought to give an exegesis on customer focus as a TQM practice and establish its effect on Performance of Listed Agricultural firms.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Over the last decade, agricultural sector has been the mainstay of Kenya's economy, contributing about 24% of the country's GDP and 80% of national employment in the vast rural setting as noted by Odalo (2015). However, the Kenyan agricultural sector has been continually faced with different challenges traceable to lack of adequate and effective customer focus as a TQM system. TQM is an approach of a firm which laid emphasis on quality, with the purpose of achieving long term success based on the contribution of all its members (Kyalo, 2013). This is realized through clients' satisfaction and what the employees of the firm and the society can benefit. In spite of customer focus being the best practice in improving performance in an organization, the performance of most firms within the agricultural sector in Kenya remains below the expectation. The poor performance is mainly as a result of poor implementation of the TQM practices. Some of the firms listed under the agricultural sector have been witnessing stagnating or declining profits (Kyalo, 2013).

According to NSE Market data (2015), the firms within the agricultural sector are not performing according to the expectations, this has translated into reduced earnings per share. The poor performance has thus become an impetus for proper examination of the TQM practices and compliance to these practices. Researches done on customer focus include; Uliet *al.*, (2008); Malik and Khan (2011); Sadikoglu and Olcay (2014); Panuwatwanich and Nguyen (2017) focused on Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey and Vietnamese respectively. In Kenya, studies conducted include Chepkech (2014), Wokabi (201) and Wanyoike (2016). However, these studies focused on, public sector, commercial banks and manufacturing sectors respectively. Therefore, the findings of such studies cannot be generalized for agricultural firms (sector).The performance challenge that this study aimed to solve is declining or stagnating profits that arises from loss of customers while filling the research gaps.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The objective of the study was to examine the influence of customer focus on performance of Agricultural firms listed on the NSE, Kenya.

### **1.4 Research Question**

The study sought to answer the research question below.

- i) What is the influence of customer focus on performance of Agricultural firms listed on the NSE, Kenya?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Theoretical Review**

The research was underpinned by a couple of theories, these theories include; Quality Improvement Theory, Crosby's Approach to TQM and Organizational Learning Theory.

#### **2.2.1 Quality Improvement Theory**

Quality Improvement Theory was brought forth by Deming in 1986. It states that a characteristic of quality management belief is that it places total control of firms directly in the hands of top management. The theory opines that the executive is accountable for the systems, and that 80 percent of organizational issues are generated by the system. (Hill,1995). Deming (1986) believed that systematic approach is the best approach to problem-solving. Under this approach, Plan Do

Check Act cycle (PDCA) was encouraged. PDCA is a concept that has an aim to continually encourage productivity, thereby bridging the gap between consumers' needs and the production of agricultural industries. Deming's Quality Improvement Theory is significant to this research because TQM practices is utilized in promoting quality of goods and services through constant advancement which firms can use to achieve high level of growth. This notion of quality improvement theory supports the variable on customer focus.

### **2.2.2 Crosby's Approach to TQM**

This approach was propounded by Crosby (1979). This was in response to the quality crisis where he brought about the principle of always doing the right thing the first time. This approach came with four major principles: quality definition is in accordance to both the product and the customer's requirements. Furthermore, Crosby views problems in an organization as bacteria of nonconformance which have to be 'vaccinated' with organizational antibodies' to avoid issues (Crosby, 1984). This approach was of guidance to this study as it aimed at understanding the effect of customer focus on performance. This approach main emphasis was the issue of quality which is paramount in customer focus.

### **2.3 Empirical Review**

Research was conducted by Abdullah, and Uli (2008) on impacts of TQM on organizational performance of firms in Malaysian Manufacturing Sector. Results of the research reveal that focus has a positive influence on performance of Malaysian firms. Importantly, the authors focused on manufacturing companies in Malaysia, to address the research gap this research was centered on agricultural firms in Kenya.

Shaohan (2009) purposed to explain the prominence of customer focus in improving organizational performance. The concentration was on the 143,000 Chinese companies with revenues of at least 5 million. Stratified random sampling technique was used. The outcome revealed that the improvement in organizational performance arises from the improved production performance which arises from proper customer orientation. The limitation however was the fact that the main area of concentration was the Chinese companies which implies that generalizations cannot be absolutely made to other countries.

Chepkoch (2014) conducted a research on TQM influence on performance in Kenya: A Case of Tertiary Institutions in UasinGishu County. The results of the study show that TQM practices impact positively on performance of tertiary institutions in UasinGishu County, Kenya. customer focus was one of the aspects that were given attention to by the survey. On the issue of focus on customers, the study presents enough evidence that it has a noteworthy effect on performance of tertiary institutions in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. However, the study was focused on Uasin Gishu County, Kenya besides focusing on tertiary institutions which is an entirely different sector. This inquiry focused on agricultural firms listed on the NSE.

Sadikoglu and Olcay (2014) carried out a research to investigate the influence of TQM on Performance, the Barriers and reasons to TQM of firms in Turkey. The study has a response rate of 48.4 percent. Multiple regression analysis was used in the research. The research found positive relationship between customer focus and performances of firms. However, the study was conducted for firms in Turkey and the study has a low response rate of 48.4%. The rule of thumb is that a business research should have a minimum of 50% response rate. Therefore, the current study was conducted for agricultural firms listed on the NSE in Kenya.

Yaacob (2014) sought to demonstrate how the performance of public firms is affected either directly or indirectly by the focus on the customer. 205 managers directly involved in customer focus process were considered in the collection of information. The outcomes of the study depicted a material effect of focus on customers on performance. An indirect relationship between the customer focus and customer satisfaction was also established. The sector under focus nevertheless was the public sector, thus while there are firms that falls within the purview of the public sector, the findings cannot be generalized to all agricultural firms considering that some private firms fall within the agricultural sector. This underscores the importance of the present study.

Similarly, Wokabi (2016) carried a research on quality management practices and financial performance in Kenya. The variables included in the study were commitment of management, customer focus, employee involvement and process management. For the analysis of the study, a multiple regression model was adopted. Results provided evidence that customer focus is significant in predicting the performance of commercial banks in Kenya. However, the study focused on commercial banks in Kenya, the current study seeks to address the contextual gap by focusing on customer focus and its influence on performance of agricultural firms listed on the NSE.

A study was conducted by Panuwatwanich and Nguyen (2017) on the impacts of TQM on Vietnamese construction firm's performance. Among the variables that were focused on included the concept of focusing on the customers. Findings of the study show that total quality management positively affects the organizational performance of Vietnamese construction firms. Specifically, the findings provided evidence that by putting emphasis on customers there is a great impact on Vietnamese construction firm's performance. The research was focused on Vietnamese construction firms. This research investigation focused on listed agricultural firms on the NSE, Kenya.

## 2.4 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework shows the linkage between variables in a research. It guides and points out how the variables in the proposed study are inter-related to the researcher (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013). Customer focus constitutes the independent variable while the dependent variable is performance of agricultural firms listed on the NSE, Kenya.

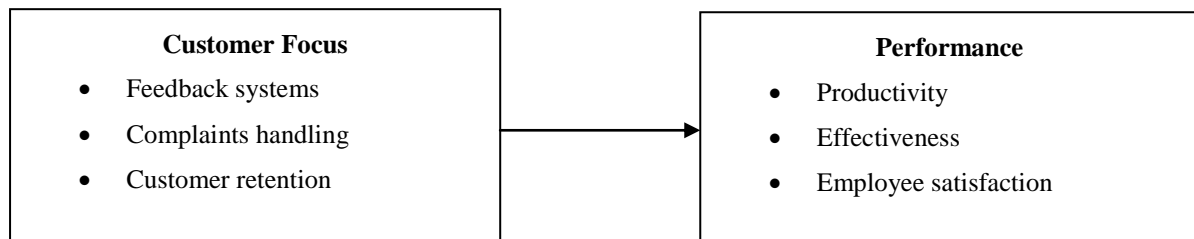


Figure 2.1: Conceptual framework

Source (Researcher, 2019)

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research design

Cooper and Schindler (2009) are of the view that research design forms the basis for the analysis of research data. Therefore, it refers to an outline plan which is adopted in a study by a researcher to generate answers to research questions (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The study utilized descriptive and explanatory research design. Descriptive studies provide description of the general characteristics of the study population and variables (Cooper & Schindler, 2009). The explanatory research design provides an exegesis on the aspects of a study in a detailed manner especially where a problem was not properly researched previously (Shields and Patricia, 2013). This study used explanatory research since the aspect of customer focus in the agricultural sector has not been studied more clearly hence was appropriate in improving the final research design.

### 3.2 Target Population

The study concentrated on all agricultural industries listed at the NSE. Thus, the target population of the study comprised of seven agricultural firms. The research was based on a census sampling technique; the choice of a census sampling technique is attributed to the fact that there are just seven agricultural firms listed on the NSE, Kenya. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) assert that a research utilizes census approach in the case where the population involved is small. Quality assurance managers, procurement managers, heads of internal auditing, controllers, supervisors and their assistants were the preferred respondents of the study. With seven companies in the agricultural sector that are listed at NSE, the expected number of respondents is seventy (70). The inclusion of the assistants was to complement the managers or heads. The quality assurance managers, supervisors and controllers are experts in the area of quality and are involved in the formulation of policies, while internal quality auditors are responsible for carrying out implementation and maintenance of quality management practices and are assumed to be knowledgeable in the area. The choice of respondents was in line with the notion by Gerhart (2000) who opine that business researches that utilize single respondents are characterized by measurement error, thus the choice of four respondents.

### 3.3 Data Collection Instrument and procedure

The study was based on the primary data with a questionnaire that was presented to the firm employees of interest. Closed-ended questions were utilized in the questionnaire based on a 5 point like it scale. The researcher dropped the questionnaires for filling and picked them after completion by respondents. Under this procedure, the researcher, presented the questionnaires to the respondents and picked them at a set later date. The time frame was enough to allow the respondents to reflect on the questions so they could give authentic answers.

### 3.3.1 Validity

Both construct and content validity was ensured in the course of the study. To establish content validity, a research instrument was examined by specialists in the field of quality management where their suggestions and views were incorporated in the questionnaire. On the other hand in order to ensure construct validity relevant literature which span from theoretical and empirical literature was focused on which helped in ensuring questions are in line with literature. The instrument in this research was also be looked at by the research supervisor; this is in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (2013) who contended that content validity is ascertained by seeking guidance from professionals in that field.

### 3.3.2 Reliability

Reliability relates to a measure of the extent to which instruments used in a research yield consistent results (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013). The research instruments are required to be consistent. A pre-test was conducted where the respondents were taken through the questionnaire which is the tool for collecting data. The data was analyzed through using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The alpha coefficient obtained was 0.878. Reid (2006) indicated the rule to be that a coefficient above or equal to 0.7 is seen to be acceptable which is good as it indicates construct reliability thus from the findings it is clear that the data used passed the reliability test.

### 3.4 Data Analysis and presentation

After the filled questionnaires were collected, they were checked and sorted for order after which they were edited to correct illegible, incomplete, inconsistent and ambiguous responses. Coding of research data was then done. The codes assigned helped the researcher in minimizing errors of data entry and thereafter processing. The descriptive analysis was conducted as this provided the means, standard deviation and other measures of dispersion. The presentation of data was done using tables, figures and charts.

The study used the multiple regression models to show the impacts of TQM and performance of agricultural firms listed on the NSE. The regression equations are in the order;

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Y = Performance of Agricultural Firms Listed on the NSE

X<sub>1</sub> = Customer Focus

B<sub>0</sub>=Constant

B<sub>1</sub>=Regression Coefficients

ε = Error term

## 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. Response rate.

The response rate was 79% that is 55 respondents out of 70. This is therefore considered as a good representative. This is in line with Mugenda and Mugenda (2013) that a response rate of 50% and above is adequate for analysis and drawing conclusion

### 4.2 Performance Listed Agricultural firms in Kenya.

The researcher analyzed the data collected on the performance of agricultural firms and presented the results in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1: Performance of Listed Agricultural firms in Kenya**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Decisions regarding quality matters are made by both workers and managers	55	3.00	5.00	4.2000	.67769
Workers are given the opportunity for professional growth through organized training	55	3.00	5.00	4.0000	.66667

Timely delivery of products to buyers.	55	1.00	5.00	4.1273	.92405
Physical facilities are adequately utilized	55	1.00	5.00	3.9273	.76629
There is efficient administrative system that supports organizational growth	55	1.00	5.00	3.4182	.80946
<b>Average scores</b>				<b>3.9345</b>	<b>0.7688</b>

Source: Survey Data (2019)

From the descriptive statistics shown in Table 4.1 decisions regarding quality matters by workers and managers had the highest mean of 4.2000 with a corresponding standard deviation of 0.67769. This implying that the respondents generally agreed as indicated with a minimum of 3.00 and maximum of 5.00. Similarly, most of the respondents agreed that workers are given the opportunity for professional growth through organized training as indicated by a mean and standard deviation of 4.0000 and 0.66667 respectively. Timely delivery of products to buyers had a mean of 4.1273 and standard deviation of 0.92405. The respondents had varying responses on physical facilities being adequately delivered with a mean of 3.9273. Lastly, efficient administrative systems had a mean of 3.4182 and standard deviation of 0.80946.

#### 4.3 Effect of customer focus on performance of Agricultural firms listed in Kenya.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics on customer focus.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Complaints by customers are well channeled and handled	55	2.00	5.00	3.5273	.92004
Customer retention is ensured through provision of quality products	55	1.00	5.00	4.1273	.92405
There is frequent review of customer needs so as to incorporate the changes in their taste and preferences'	55	1.00	5.00	3.9273	.76629
There is high patronage as a result of customers being loyal	55	1.00	5.00	4.0000	1.23228
Feedback from customers are given priority.	55	2.00	5.00	3.5273	.92004
<b>Average Scores</b>				<b>3.8218</b>	<b>0.9525</b>

Source: Survey Data (2019)

Table 4.2 provides the descriptive statistics on customer focus. The statements that complaints by customers are well channeled and handled had a mean of 3.5273 and a standard deviation of 0.92004. Customer retention is ensured through the provision of quality products had a mean of 4.1273 and standard deviation of 0.92405. The statement that there is frequent review of customer needs has a mean of 3.9273 and standard deviation of 0.76629. The respondents agreed that there is high patronage with a mean of 4.0000 and standard deviation of 1.23228. Giving priority to feedback from customers had a mean of 3.5273 and standard deviation of 0.92004. A past study by Abdullah, and Uli (2008) on impacts of TQM on organizational performance of firms in the Malaysian Manufacturing Sector, found similar findings thus agree that customer focus in paramount in as far as performance is concerned. A similar result is also seen in the study by Wokabi (2016) on quality management practices and financial performance in Kenya. The respondents mostly agreed that customer focus have an impact on performance.

Table 4.3: Analysis of Variance

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 n	17.630	1	17.630	8.921	.004 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	104.739	53	1.976		
Total	122.368	54			

a. Dependent Variable: Performance of Agricultural firms

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Focus

Source (Survey data (2019)).

The ANOVA analysis was aimed at ascertaining the effect of customer focus on performance of listed Agricultural firms in Kenya. From the findings, the model was significant with a p-value of 0.000 which implies that the model was good for estimation. It is also an indication that the customer focus has a significant influence on performance of Agricultural firms listed in NSE.

#### 4.4 Regression analysis.

The enquiry used multiple regression analysis in assessing the effect of customer focus as a TQM practice on performance of Agricultural firms Listed at the NSE, Kenya.

Table 4.4: Regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1							
(Constant)	-4.685	2.151		-2.178	.034	-9.001	-.370
Customer Focus	1.608	.538	.380	2.987	.004	.528	2.687

a. Dependent Variable: Performance of Agricultural firms

Source: Survey data (2019).

The regression model that was estimated through the results of regression analysis is presented below:

$$Y = -4.685 + 1.608X_1 + \epsilon$$

The results show that a unit increase in customer focus leads to a 1.608 times increase in performance of listed Agricultural firms. The increase in performance is significant at 0.05 level of significance as shown by the p value of 0.004.

The results therefore agree with that of Abdullah, and Uli (2008) on impacts of TQM on organizational performance of firms in Malaysian Manufacturing Sector. The study found customer focus to have a positive influence on performance of Malaysian firms. Similarly, Sadikoglu and Olcay (2014) found customer focus to significantly impact on the Performance of firms in Turkey. Wokabi (2016) also revealed that customer focus is significant in predicting the performance of commercial banks in Kenya. Customer focus enables firms to be on the know on customer taste and preferences and their changes, this therefore is responsible for the positive significant effect of customer focus on performance of Agricultural Firms listed at the NSE, Kenya.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to establish the effect of customer focus on the performance of listed agricultural firms in Kenya. The result revealed that there was a positive significant effect of customer focus on performance of Listed Agricultural firms. The results indicated that customer focus has a positive significant effect on the performance of Listed Agricultural firms. Since customers are the sole aim of businesses and so is the performance of firms. Therefore, the study recommended that customer focus should be the focus of managers as this is key in influencing firm performance. Specifically the study recommends a more serious focus on improving quality of services to sustain the customer base as well as taking the customer complaints more promptly.

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