

Word of Mouth and Referrals: A Modern Compelling Tool for Customer Patronage Behaviour of Event Planning Business in Ekiti State

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The study examined word of mouth and customer referral on customer patronage in Ekiti State. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was derived from 21 event halls in Ado-Ekiti Metropolis. The sample size was 84 using census sampling. Primary data used for the study were gathered through a structured questionnaire. Data gathered were analysed using linear regression. The result showed that word of mouth positively affects customer patronage ($f=150.524$, $t=14.372$, 0.000); Furthermore, showed that referral positively affects customer patronage ($f=75.327$, $t=11.655$, 0.000) all at 0.05 level of significance. Thus, the study concluded that word of mouth and customer referrals positively affect customer patronage of event planning businesses in Ekiti State.

Keyword: Word of Mouth, Customer Referral, Patronage.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For decades, word of mouth has been a topic of concern in the scholarly community (Kundu & Rajan, 2017). This is because it is one of the most powerful forms of communication, particularly in a developing country like Nigeria. Event organising is a rapidly growing sector in Nigeria that has received little attention in recent research. The business is the process by which event planners or managers oversee a project like a conference, convention, trade fair, ceremony, team-building exercise, party, or convention. In light of this, the event planning industry concentrates only on products and services, which primarily define the amount of contact and connection with people. Customer referrals and word-of-mouth recommendations are extremely valuable. Researchers have demonstrated the expanding effect of word of mouth, and marketers identify it as a highly reputable source of marketing information (Huang, Cai, Tsang, & Zhou, 2011). Furthermore, referrals and recommendations from friends, coworkers, or other customers may be quite beneficial. According to McKinsey (2010), word of mouth has a greater impact in emerging countries throughout the world. Understanding customers offers several advantages, including the consumption process. According to common knowledge and the undeniable fact of word-of-mouth communication, customers feel

freer and more relaxed when they have someone to talk to throughout the purchase or decision-making process, and they have more confidence in referrals from peers and family members. Consumer conduct broad knowledge has personal significance. It may help individuals become better customers after being informed. Furthermore, it might assist consumers in the purchasing process by telling them about some of the methods utilised by businesses in their market (Foxall & Goldsmith, quoted in Ahmad, Vveinhardt & Ahmed, 2014).

Consumer purchasing habits are becoming more conscious of what they buy. (Lange and Elliott, 2012). Even though they will usually license the cheapest ones with the highest quality, it is not always easy to know which one is the best. People seek information and views about a service before making a purchase (Attia, Aziz, & Friedman, 2012). Consumer purchase behaviour is growing increasingly focused on the quality of the service provided to individuals. (Lange and Elliott, 2012). Regardless of whether they will usually allow the least costly ones with the highest quality, it is difficult to ensure that they are the best. Individuals get information and opinions about the item from others before purchasing. Word-of-mouth communication is extremely powerful since it is the most trusted source of

product, content, and experience information for almost every customer in the world. Consumers always value the opinions of their friends and like-minded individuals over marketing initiatives designed to persuade them to buy. According to Khanna and Kukreti (2020), word of mouth is one of the most powerful factors in purchasing decisions nowadays. Humans have always communicated with one another, exchanging and discussing ideas and experiences in all places and at all times. Communication is a simple approach to convey your point of view, opinion, thoughts, agreement, or disagreement, and thus contributes to informal discussions.

Word of mouth has grown more efficient and successful for its purpose thanks to technological advancements. Consumers prefer to rely on their purchasing decisions completely on recommendations from friends and family based on personal experience. Word-of-mouth consumer-supplier communication has long been used to provide consumers with more information about a product or service before or during the purchasing process. It has been quite beneficial, particularly for consumers who want to pick where there appears to be a lack of service information, potentially questionable situations, less or limited-service information, or a general need for greater understanding. Regardless of the economic position, the company's reputation, or the quality of service at issue, word of mouth is incredibly valuable in a variety of commercial settings. In light of the foregoing, numerous studies on word of mouth and customer referrals have been conducted on various dependent variables relating to consumer decision-making or behaviour, but none of the existing studies consider the potential link between the aforementioned variables, particularly in the event planning business sector, which is becoming more competitive in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The specific objective of the study is to:

- i. evaluate the impact of word of mouth on customer patronage of Event planners Business in Ekiti State;
- ii. determine the effect of customer referral on customer patronage of Event planners Business in Ekiti State.

Significance of the Research

The major consumer trends to rely on word of mouth for event planning business patronage. This study would be beneficial to managers of event planning businesses across Ekiti State to always ensure quality service delivery and prioritise customer satisfaction to maintain positive word of mouth that can increase customer patronage and re-patronage behaviour.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Word of Mouth

Word-of-mouth is one of the most important routes of distribution. Word of mouth may impact other people's opinions, beliefs, and decisions. Word of mouth is not shilling marketing, in which actors are employed by businesses to establish a conversation process with customers without disclosing that it is manufactured. If word-of-mouth power is used appropriately, it has the potential to sell any service for an extended period of time. It can imprint a powerful image in the individual's memory. Word of mouth may be good, as can harsh local market influences. Word of mouth has double the value that advertising does for customers. Advertising keeps us in the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The word-of-mouth interaction process is one of the most powerful, effective, and persuasive influencers in the marketplace. This is largely because buyers rely entirely on informal means of communication and private sources to make purchasing decisions, rather than more formal or organisational sources like advertising campaigns and official websites. In recent years, the marketing/advertising sector appears to be dominant in gaining a deeper understanding of word of mouth and incorporating it into their daily growth strategies, owing to the fact that traditional channels of communication have been inefficient.

Word of mouth is described as any good or negative comment made by customers about a product or company that is shared with a large number of people and institutions (Hennig, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Word of mouth may also be defined as a type of communication between two non-commercial individuals who have no financial interest in the business being discussed (Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012). Following consumption of the product or service, an increasing number of customers are eager to reply, resulting in an interchange of information and an increase in word of mouth. According to Westbrook, as mentioned in Chen (2011), word of mouth is the opinion that customers unofficially share with others after using or using a service. Word of mouth is a method of obtaining other people's experiences via the use of social networks. This type of information exchange is often seen as more unbiased and dependable (Chen, 2011). This is because it is primarily produced directly by customers rather than businesses. Some individuals believe that marketing is all about commercials and promotions. Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (2001) proposed that post-purchase behaviour refers to customer reactions after purchasing a product. Customers have two sorts of reactions: satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Customer Referral

Intangibility is a critical property of all services, making it difficult to evaluate service quality. Referrals are vital in the service business (Dobele, White, Doan, & Fry, 2008). The rationale for this is that information comes from a personal, independent source; therefore,

referrals are a helpful tool for identifying new possibilities. Several businesses used client referrals to gain new customers by leveraging existing customer contentment and excellent delivery. Customer referral behaviour refers to how customers respond to recommendation schemes. Prior studies focused on the primary drivers of referral behaviour. Wirtz, Tang, and Georgi (2019) discovered the factors that influence effective recommendation behaviour among inductors (existing customers). According to the research findings, meta-perception, incentive attractiveness, and opportunism are the most important factors influencing inductors' effective referral behaviour. And the intrinsic reason, namely engagement, has no effect on the referral behaviour of existing consumers. Wirtz, Orsingher, Chew, and Tambyah (2013) discovered that pleasure and tie strength play an important role in referral behaviour. In the case of incentivised referrals, a pleased customer is more likely to promote the product or service than an unsatisfied customer. Furthermore, consumers who received referrals from friends and family (weak links) were more impacted by referrals than customers who were only acquaintances (strong ties). That means recommendation behaviour varies according to client happiness and tie strength. Unlike Wirtz, Orsingher, Chew, and Tambyah (2013), Sciandra (2019) said that the lack or presence of compensation has no effect on the likelihood of recommendation acceptance in the event of strong relationships. For weak relationships, the introduction of an incentive reduces consumer acceptance of recommendations. Dose, Walsh, Beatty and Elsner (2019) suggested that in the case of more creative products, rewarding both the referrer and the referee impacts referral likelihood more than rewarding either the referrer or not rewarding at all. However, the referral chance of consumers with fewer products stays the same for double, one, and no rewards.

Considerable Crucial Factors for Customer Influence

Before referral or word of mouth can be effective, there must have been a satisfied customer who have patronised the business before making recommendations or referrals, which would be highlighted further.

Authenticity and Trust:

Consumers generally trust recommendations from people they know (friends, family, colleagues) more than they trust traditional advertising or company-controlled marketing messages. This inherent trust acts as a powerful motivator for trying a new service.

Social Proof in the Digital Age:

While traditional word of mouth is powerful, the digital age amplifies it through online reviews, social media mentions, and influencer recommendations. Positive online testimonials serve as digital social proof, influencing potential customers who research services before making decisions.

Reduced Perceived Risk:

The service sector inherently involves an "experience good" nature you often cannot evaluate the quality until you've consumed the service. A personal recommendation from a trusted source significantly reduces the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with trying an unknown service provider.

Targeted Reach:

Referrals are often highly targeted. A satisfied customer is likely to recommend a service to someone they believe will genuinely benefit from it, leading to a higher conversion rate of referred customers.

Emotional Connection and Engagement:

When customers are willing to refer a business, it often indicates a strong positive emotional connection or a consistently exceptional experience. This engagement creates brand advocates who actively promote the service, not just passively use it.

Event Planning Business Overview

Event management activities help to bridge the gap between businesses and customers. The execution of the event, as well as other aspects of the event, is inextricably linked to the event management. An event is a programme that involves systematic organisation and execution via the formation of a committee of members that will benefit the consumers. With the growing number of competitors between private enterprises and the government, preserving customer happiness is one of the top goals for retaining existing customers and attracting new ones. Additional elements that event management firms must consider include the environment, communication, and customer satisfaction (Parmar and Gajjar, 2021). Event management also includes the act of planning all aspects of meetings and conventions, from speakers and meeting locations to printed materials and audio-visual equipment. The event planning process begins with establishing the sponsor's desired outcome. This area of business is the exciting skill of choreographing people and events to produce a spectacle that will leave a lasting impression. Budgeting, setting timelines, selecting and reserving event sites, obtaining permits, planning food, coordinating transportation, developing a theme, arranging for activities, arranging for equipment and facilities, risk management, and developing contingency plans are all part of the event planning process.

Planners frequently multitask and confront several deadlines while orchestrating the activity of many different groups of individuals. Event organisers may often travel extensively to attend meetings and explore potential meeting locations. They are highly experienced with physical activity that involves long hours of standing and walking, among other things, and they ensure that everything is in order and that an event runs well and without incident. The most common events that require a planner in Nigeria nowadays are wedding

ceremonies/receptions, house-warming parties, birthday parties, fundraising parties, end-of-year parties, business conferences, music concerts, and festivals, to name a few. All of them require the ability of an event planner to properly coordinate and highlight the visual brilliance for their own sake. The perfect event manager should be able to arrange and pay attention to details, manage time, communicate effectively, and supervise others.

Customer Patronage Behaviour

Customer patronage is a function of satisfaction in various businesses visited for utility derivatives; it is a business philosophy that aims to create value for customers by anticipating and managing their expectations, as well as demonstrating the ability and responsibility to meet their needs (Sogunro & Abiola, 2014). Oladele (2007) defined consumer behaviour as an interdisciplinary discipline that studies consumers' decision-making activities in their consuming roles. The fact that consumers react logically when attempting to make a decision is sufficient to support the need to pay attention to all variables capable of luring customers to commence a purchase decision. Customers' pleasure, preferences, and loyalty may all influence their purchasing behaviour. When clients are pleased with the service provided, they either choose to stay with that supplier or switch to others who can suit their needs. As a result of addressing customers' demands, satisfied customers tend to advocate or suggest to other relatives or friends by word of mouth, resulting in loyalty to the firm. The effective satisfaction that customers receive would undoubtedly improve consumer patronage behaviour (Olasehinde, Ogundipe, Ayodele, & Bankole, 2020).

A company's performance is judged by the largest proportion of satisfied customers. It is the primary factor that defines the quality of services delivered to clients. It is also critical to ensure the longevity of a firm and gain the trust of all partners. Client pleasure is the primary goal of every activity arranged by an event business. Reaching client expectations and creating a proper setting for such an event are just a few elements that may help you create an unforgettable experience that leads to customer pleasure. The issue frequently arises when blue-collar workers are unable to use all of their expertise, particularly when engaging with consumers (Parmar & Gajjar, 2021). Customers are confused by the abundance of items or services available in the market. In this aspect, word-of-mouth communication is an excellent option for marketers to address this issue and capture their attention since it effectively cuts through the cacophony of all other formal non-traditional means. Any transaction, whether in business or in any other human scenario, requires communication between two or more people. The widespread availability of any product or service of the same disposal necessitates the consumer making a decision about which one best meets their needs effectively at that exact moment of disposal. According to common knowledge and the undeniable

truth of word-of-mouth communication, consumers feel freer and more relaxed when they have someone to talk to during the purchase or decision-making process, and they are more confident in referrals from peers and family members (Libanda & Nzorubara, 2017).

Theoretical Review

This study is based on Kelman's (1958) social influence theory. This theory is considered important to this study because it describes how word-of-mouth marketing impacts and shapes customer purchasing behaviour. According to the social influence hypothesis, people affect an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours through three major processes: compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman 1958). Conformity, peer pressure, compliance, persuasion, and leadership are all examples of social influence that may be observed in a variety of social settings, including marketing and sales. The theory highlights the importance of social environments and individuals in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and actions and emphasises the different levels at which social influence can occur (Naeem, 2020). Overall, the social influence hypothesis offers useful insights into how people are impacted by their social environments. In the context of this study, the social influence theory is relevant to this study because it makes assumptions that resonate with the purpose of this study. This study investigated the impact of word-of-mouth and referral as a communication strategy on consumer behaviour towards event planner firms. The idea also suggests that social contacts, such as customer referrals, may impact customers' patronage behaviour towards event planning organisations. Furthermore, the social influence hypothesis suggests that word-of-mouth communications are social forces capable of shaping and/or influencing consumer purchasing behaviour.

Conceptual Framework

The framework depicted the potential link between word of mouth, customer referral and customer patronage. Thus, the adoption of this variable (word of mouth and customer referral) is expected to influence or predict customer patronage in the event planning business industry.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Ado-Ekiti metropolis in Ekiti State, Nigeria. This study adopted a descriptive research design. Data to be used for the study was collected through the circulation of carefully designed questionnaires to Ekiti State University Students in Ado-Ekiti. The population covered customers or celebrants of events from January to December 2025. However, twenty-one (21) Event Hall (AB Civic Hall, K-Best Hall, Amazing Grace Hall, Ayoade Hall, Hassanat Hall, Damlek Hall, Arowolo Hall, Adetiloye Hall, Anchor Hall, CDA Hall, Oguntuase Hall, Jibowu Hall, BJC Hall, Great Eagle Hall, Aderionla Hall, Omololu Hall, Deborah Hall, NTS Hall, Civic

Centre, Ajaleye Hall and Apata Hall) were purposely selected within Ado-Ekiti Metropolis, where users who were the customers within the time frame were employed. Therefore, eighty-four (84) respondents were employed as the study population. The entire population was employed using census sampling. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. The descriptive statistics was used to analyse the demographic information of the respondents through simple percentage and frequency tables. To achieve the specific objective of this study, inferential statistics through the use of simple linear regression were employed. The multiple regression line is stated as:

$$Cpb = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Wom + \mu \dots \dots \dots (3.1)$$

Cpb = Customer Patronage Behaviour

β_0 = Constant

Wom = Word of Mouth

μ = Stochastic or Error Term

$$Cpb = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Rfr + \mu \dots \dots \dots (3.2)$$

Cpb = Customer Patronage Behaviour

β_0 = Constant

Rfr = Referral

μ = Stochastic or Error Term

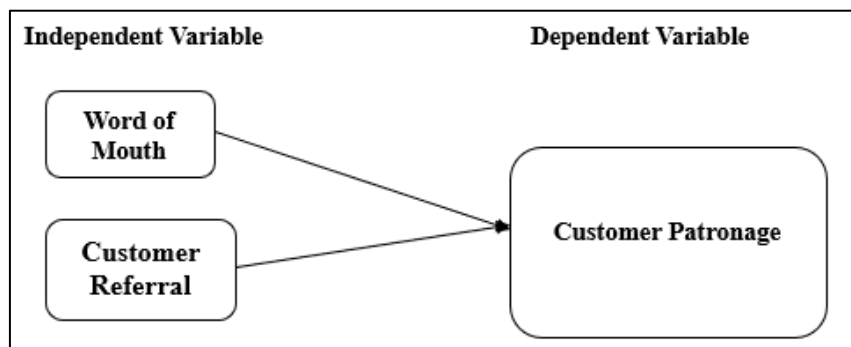


Figure 2.1: Relationship between Word of Mouth, Customer Referral and Customer Patronage

Source: Author's Conceptualisation (2025)

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Event distribution of respondents showed that forty-two (50%) of the respondents did wedding party, twenty-two (26.2%) of the respondents did burial party while twenty (23.8%) of the respondents did birthday party thus implied that most of the respondents in the survey did wedding party. Respondents' patronage awareness showed that thirty-eight (45.2%) of the respondents patronised the planner through word of mouth, thirty-four (40.5%) of the respondents patronised the planner through customer referral, while six (14.3%) of the respondents patronised the planner through other means thus implying that most of the respondents patronised event planners based on word of mouth.

Occupation of the respondents indicated that twenty-seven (32.1%) of the respondents are public servants, twenty-five (29.8%) of the respondents are civil servants while thirty-two (38.1%) of the respondents are business owners thus implied that most of the respondents are business owners. Planner engagement distribution of respondents showed that fifty-nine (70.2%) of the respondents employed event planners for their events while twenty-five (29.8%) of the respondents do not employ event planners thus implied that most respondents employed event planners for their events.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Event		
Wedding	42	50.0
Burial	22	26.2
Birthday	20	23.8
Total	84	100.0
Patronage Awareness		
Word of Mouth	38	45.2
Referral	34	40.5
Other Means	12	14.3
Total	84	100.0
Occupation		
Public Servant	27	32.1
Civil Servants	25	29.8
Business Owner	32	38.1
Total	84	100.0
Planner Engagement		
Planners Employed	59	70.2
Planners Not Employed	25	29.8
Total	84	100.0

Source: Author's Computation, 2025

Results Interpretation

Word of Mouth and Customer Patronage

The effect of independent variable (word of mouth) on dependent variable (customer patronage) was subjected to linear regression and the hypothesis was tested using F-Statistic. Table 2 revealed the regression co-efficient of word of mouth on customer patronage

showed a positive value (0.801), this showed a very strong positive effect of word of mouth on customer patronage. The co-efficient of multiple determinant (R^2) with a value (0.642) indicated that word of mouth can describe 64.2% of the behaviour of customer patronage while the remaining 35.8% can be described by the stochastic variable. The adjusted R^2 also confirmed the result of the R^2 with a value (0.638), which indicated 63.8% of word of mouth on customer patronage after adjustment while the remaining 36.2% is described via the error term. From the table it was revealed that the T-value, co-efficient of word of mouth is (Beta 0.700, $t=14.372$, 0.000), this implied that word of mouth has a

positive and significant effect on customer patronage. Therefore, it implied that an increase in word of mouth will lead to 70% increase in customer patronage. The study hypothesis was tested through F statistic, thus revealed a significance value of 150.524, the value implied an acceptance of alternate hypothesis and rejected null hypothesis. Hence word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on customer patronage. The above results implied that word of mouth go a long way and cheaper in promoting businesses to among peer groups, friends and family, which affect purchasing behaviour of event planning business at large.

Table 2: Word of Mouth Effect on Customer Patronage

Variables	Beta	T-Statics	P-value
Constant	2.002	6.685	.000
Word of Mouth	.700	14.372	.000
R	.801*		
R²	.642*		
R²	.638*		
F*	150.524		

Source: Author's Field Survey, (2025)

Referral and Customer Patronage

The effect of independent variable (customer referral) on dependent variable (customer patronage) was subjected to linear regression and the hypothesis was tested using F-Statistic. Table 3 revealed the regression co-efficient of customer referral on customer patronage showed a positive value (0.688), this showed a strong positive effect of customer referral on customer patronage. The co-efficient of multiple determinant (R^2) with a value (0.473) indicated that customer referral can describe 47.3% of the behaviour of customer patronage while the remaining 52.7% can be described by the stochastic variable. The adjusted R^2 also confirmed the result of the R^2 with a value (0.467), which indicated 46.7% of customer referral on customer patronage after

adjustment while the remaining 53.3% is described via the error term. From the table it was revealed that the T-value, co-efficient of customer referral is (Beta 0.518, $t=11.655$, 0.000), this implied that customer referral has a positive and significant effect on customer patronage. Therefore, it implied that an increase in customer referral will lead to 52% increase in customer patronage. The study hypothesis was tested through F statistic, thus revealed a significance value of 75.327, the value implied an acceptance of alternate hypothesis and rejected null hypothesis. Hence customer referral has a positive and significant effect on customer patronage. The result implied that the impact of customer referral cannot be underestimated in determining the patronage behaviour of event planning business customers.

Table 2: Referral Effect on Customer Patronage

Variables	Beta	T-Statics	P-value
Constant	2.231	17.339	.000
Referral	.518	11.655	.000
R	.688*		
R²	.473*		
R²	.467*		
F*	75.327		

Source: Author's Field Survey, (2025)

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The retrieved data was analysed via linear regression. The hypothesis of the study was tested through F-statistic and the regression value showed that word of mouth has a significant effect on customer patronage. Furthermore, from the regression result, word of mouth significantly affects customer patronage of event planning businesses in Ado-Ekiti metropolis. The outcome of the result revealed very strong significant

values of word of mouth on customer patronage implying that customer patronage can be enhanced and improved through word of mouth. The outcome implied that a satisfied customer would definitely share his or her experience with friends, family and peer group. The finding is consistent with the study of Khanna and Kukreti (2020), who investigated the impact of word-of-mouth marketing on consumers in Delhi. The findings of this study revealed that purchasing is mostly influenced

by consumer trust through word of mouth. Happy customers always promote a business. When discussing the current generation, most consumers are influenced by bloggers and social platforms; they prefer quality over quantity and reviews of products/services.

The retrieved data was analysed via linear regression. The hypothesis of the study was tested through F-statistic and the regression value showed that customer referral has a significant effect on customer patronage. Furthermore, from the regression result, customer referral significantly affects customer patronage of event planning business in Ado-Ekiti Metropolis. The outcome of the result revealed strong significant values of customer referral on customer patronage implying that customer patronage can be enhanced and improved through customer referral. This implied that referrals could only be done based on satisfied experience, word of mouth and trust. The finding is consistent to the study of Shamshana and Sravana (2024), which ascertained motivation triggers customer referral behaviour and effectiveness of referral programs in customer acquisition in India using regression. It was found that the customer referral behaviour has a significant effect on customer acquisition. Moreso, Glory, Edim, Inyang and Eko (2023) evaluated word-of-mouth communication and customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones in Nigeria. The results indicated that customer referral, celebrity endorsement, and social media exerted significant positive influences on customer patronage behaviour towards smartphones.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study found that word of mouth significantly affects customer patronage of event planning business in Ado-Ekiti Metropolis as revealed through linear regression and was positive at 0.05 level of significance. This implied that word of mouth has thoughtful positive implications in customers patronage behaviour in the event planning business industry. In the same vein, it was revealed that customer referral significantly affects customer patronage of event planning business in Ado-Ekiti Metropolis as revealed through linear regression and was positive at 0.05 level of significance. This implied that customer referral has positive implications in customers patronage behaviour in the event planning business industry. The study considers word of mouth and customer referral and their direct impact on customer patronage behaviour. However, patronage behaviour was evaluated based on customer satisfaction, customer trust and re-patronage or retention. In conclusion, word of mouth and customer referral are positively related to customer patronage of event planning businesses in Ado-Ekiti.

Consequently, upon the findings, the study recommends that event planning business managers should ensure they deliver quality service that would enhance customers as they are one of the basic tools to

promote the service they enjoyed through word of mouth or referrals to family, friends and any group they belong to. Managers should also ensure proper coordination of other service providers employed for any event in order to create a positive image in the mind of prospective customers. Customer experience with a business goes a long way, especially when satisfied and gains more trust, word of mouth and referrals would definitely be achieved. Therefore, the role of word of mouth and referral cannot be underestimated in promoting event planning business as its free and cheaper means to gain more customers and retain the existing ones.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study faced some limitations like timing in meeting all event all users or customers, which limited the study to Ado-Ekiti Metropolis Alone. Moreso, the time frame to cover the study population delayed and restricted the study towards the highlighted event halls in Ado-Ekiti.

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