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CUSTOMERS AS THE OXYGEN CABLE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: DR JOSEPH OBELE'S CUSTOMER-CENTRIC PHILOSOPHY FOR SME SURVIVAL, SUSTAINABILITY AND GROWTH

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ABSTRACT
Customers constitute one of the most critical resources for the survival, sustainability and growth of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Although traditional marketing expressions such as "the customer is always right," "the customer is king," and "the customer is God" emphasise the importance of customers, they do not fully capture the economic and relational dependence of businesses on continuous customer patronage. This paper introduces Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers, expressed as "Customers are the Oxygen Cable of SMEs," as a conceptual framework for understanding the central role of customers in business survival and growth. The oxygen-cable metaphor emphasises continuity, dependence, revenue generation, market relevance, customer feedback and business growth. The paper argues that customers are not merely recipients of products and services but active participants in the creation and sustainability of business value. Drawing on customer-centric marketing, relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, service quality and Customer Relationship Management (CRM), the paper develops a conceptual framework linking customer acquisition, customer understanding, service quality, satisfaction, retention, advocacy and SME performance. The paper concludes that entrepreneurs should move beyond viewing customers simply as kings or objects of sales and recognise them as the continuous commercial lifeline of the enterprise.

Keywords: Customers, Oxygen-Cable Philosophy, Dr Joseph Obele, SMEs, Customer Relationship Management, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Retention, Relationship Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Business Survival.

1. INTRODUCTION
Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) constitute an important component of economic activity because they contribute to employment creation, income generation, innovation, entrepreneurship development and local economic development. However, despite their importance, SMEs frequently operate under significant competitive and financial pressures. Limited capital, changing consumer preferences, technological disruption, competition, inadequate managerial capacity and fluctuating market conditions can threaten their survival. Within this environment, customers occupy a particularly important position. A business may possess capital, employees, equipment, technology, attractive premises and sophisticated products, but these resources alone cannot guarantee commercial survival. Ultimately, businesses require customers who are willing to exchange their financial resources for the value offered by the enterprise. Marketing scholarship has long emphasised the importance of understanding and satisfying customer needs. The marketing concept places customer needs and wants at the centre of organisational decision-making, while relationship marketing emphasises the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships with customers. Customer satisfaction and loyalty have also been associated with repeat patronage, positive word-of-mouth and long-term business performance.

Despite this established understanding, popular business language frequently describes the customer using expressions such as "Customer is King," "Customer is God," and "The Customer is Always Right." These expressions are useful as motivational principles because they encourage businesses to respect customers and prioritise their needs. Nevertheless, they may not adequately communicate the fundamental economic dependence of an SME on continuous customer patronage. It is against this background that Dr Joseph Obele introduces the concept of the customer as the "Oxygen Cable" of SMEs. The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers, developed and authored by Dr Joseph Obele, proposes that customers represent the continuous commercial lifeline through which SMEs generate revenue, receive market information, maintain relevance and achieve sustainable growth. The concept is presented as an original conceptual metaphor developed by Dr Joseph Obele from his experience and engagement in marketing education, entrepreneurship development and the practical business environment. While the philosophy is informed by established marketing theories—including the marketing concept, relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, service quality and Customer Relationship Management—the oxygen-cable metaphor itself is Dr Joseph Obele's conceptual contribution to the discourse on customer-centric SME management.

The central proposition of the philosophy is simple:
«"Customers are not merely kings to be served or gods to be worshipped; they are the oxygen cables that keep SMEs alive."»

The analogy is based on the fundamental role of oxygen in sustaining human life. Just as continuous access to oxygen is essential for life, continuous customer patronage is essential to the commercial survival and continuity of an SME. The purpose of this paper is therefore to develop, explain and theoretically position Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers as a customer-centric framework for understanding SME survival, sustainability and growth.

2. Conceptual Clarification of Traditional Marketing Mantras
A mantra may be understood as a short and memorable statement expressing a guiding principle or belief. In business and marketing, mantras are often used to communicate an organisation's philosophy regarding customers, service and value creation.

Three popular expressions are particularly relevant:
1. "The customer is always right."
2. "The customer is God."
3. "The customer is King."

These expressions have practical value because they remind entrepreneurs to listen to customers and treat them with respect. However, they should be understood as philosophical expressions rather than literal statements.

2.1 "The Customer Is Always Right"
The expression encourages businesses to listen to customers and avoid unnecessary confrontation. However, customers can make mistakes, misunderstand product specifications or make demands that are economically unreasonable.

For example, a customer may insist that a business sell a product below its sustainable cost. A customer-oriented business should listen respectfully and explain the situation, but customer orientation does not require an entrepreneur to operate permanently at a loss.

The more appropriate interpretation is that customers deserve to be heard and treated fairly, rather than that every customer demand must automatically be accepted.

2.2 "The Customer Is God"
This expression attempts to communicate the extraordinary importance of customers to business success. Nevertheless, its religious connotation may make it unsuitable as a universal business philosophy because people hold different religious and philosophical beliefs.

More importantly, a business relationship is fundamentally an economic and social exchange rather than an act of religious worship. Customers should be respected, valued and served professionally without being placed within a religious framework.

2.3 "The Customer Is King"
The expression is useful because it highlights respect, dignity and importance. However, the metaphor of kingship primarily communicates authority and status rather than business survival.
The central question for an SME is not simply whether customers possess authority but whether the enterprise can continue to operate without their patronage. Consequently, Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy shifts the emphasis from status and authority to survival, continuity and commercial dependence.

3. Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers
The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers, developed and authored by Dr Joseph Obele, conceptualises customers as an indispensable commercial lifeline of SMEs. The philosophy is built around the proposition that every business requires a continuous source of commercial activity to remain operational. For SMEs, customers provide this essential connection through their purchases, patronage, feedback, referrals and continuing relationships with the enterprise. The term "oxygen cable" is used metaphorically. It does not suggest that customers literally perform every function necessary for business survival. Rather, it highlights the fact that without sufficient and continuing market demand, an SME cannot sustain its operations indefinitely.

The philosophy therefore incorporates five major dimensions:

3.1 Survival
Customers generate the demand that enables an SME to continue operating. Without customers, products may remain unsold, services may remain unused and revenue may decline.

3.2 Revenue
Customer transactions generate the revenue required to meet operating expenses, pay employees, reinvest in the business and pursue profitability.

3.3 Market Relevance
Customers provide signals about changing preferences, expectations and market trends. Their behaviour can help entrepreneurs determine whether their products and services remain relevant.

3.4 Feedback
Customer complaints, suggestions, reviews and recommendations provide valuable information that can guide product and service improvement.

3.5 Growth

Satisfied and loyal customers can contribute to repeated purchases, referrals, positive word-of-mouth and expansion into new markets.

Thus, the oxygen-cable concept connects customer relationships directly with the broader survival and growth process of the SME.

4. Customers as the Lifeline of SMEs

An enterprise ultimately exists to create and exchange value. A product may be technically excellent, but its commercial value is significantly reduced when there is no market willing to purchase it.

Consequently, entrepreneurs must continuously ask fundamental questions:

- Who are our customers?
- What problems do they experience?
- What needs are they trying to satisfy?
- What value do they expect?
- Why should they choose our business rather than competitors?
- What causes them to return?
- What causes them to leave?

These questions move the entrepreneur away from a production-oriented mindset toward a customer-oriented approach. An entrepreneur who listens carefully to customers can identify emerging trends and adapt products and services accordingly. Customer feedback can therefore function as a form of market intelligence. This supports Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy, because the customer does not merely provide money through a transaction; the customer also provides information that enables the business to remain connected to the market.

5. Customer Satisfaction and SME Performance

Customer satisfaction is an important outcome of the relationship between customers and businesses. When customers perceive that a product or service has met or exceeded their expectations, they are more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward the business.

For SMEs, customer satisfaction can contribute to:
1. Repeat purchases.
2. Customer retention.
3. Positive word-of-mouth.
4. Stronger customer relationships.
5. Improved business reputation.
6. Increased opportunities for cross-selling and up-selling.

However, customer satisfaction should not be treated as an isolated objective. Entrepreneurs should seek to create sustainable value while maintaining financial viability.

A business that satisfies customers by continuously selling below cost may achieve temporary customer approval but cannot maintain its operations indefinitely. Effective customer orientation must therefore balance customer value with organisational sustainability.

6. Customer Retention and Loyalty

Customer acquisition is only the beginning of the customer relationship. Long-term SME sustainability requires the ability to retain valuable customers. Retention is important because an existing customer already has experience with the business and may have developed familiarity and trust. A loyal customer can generate repeated transactions over time and may recommend the business to others.

Customer loyalty may be strengthened through:
- consistent product quality;
- reliable service delivery;
- fair and transparent pricing;
- effective communication;
- complaint resolution;
- personalised attention;
- convenience;
- trust and integrity; and
- continuous value creation.

The entrepreneur should therefore move from a transactional mindset, where the primary objective is to make a single sale, to a relational mindset, where the objective is to create conditions for continuing mutually beneficial exchanges.

This principle is central to Dr Joseph Obele's oxygen-cable philosophy because a cable that is continuously disconnected cannot provide continuous oxygen. In the same way, an SME that repeatedly loses customers must continually replace them merely to maintain its market position.

7. Customer Relationship Management and the Oxygen-Cable Philosophy
Customer Relationship Management (CRM) provides a practical mechanism for implementing customer-centric business strategies.

CRM involves the systematic management of interactions and relationships between an organisation and its customers. For SMEs, effective CRM does not necessarily require expensive technological systems. Even small businesses can adopt basic CRM practices.

An SME can:
- maintain accurate customer records;
- remember customer preferences;
- communicate regularly;
- respond quickly to enquiries;
- address complaints professionally;
- follow up after purchases;
- provide relevant information;
- reward loyal customers; and
- use customer feedback to improve products and services.

The oxygen-cable philosophy strengthens the rationale for CRM. If customers are essential to business continuity, then the relationship between the enterprise and its customers must be deliberately protected and managed.

8. Customers and Business Growth
Customers are directly connected to the growth prospects of SMEs. An expanding customer base creates opportunities for increased sales, revenue generation and market penetration. However, growth should not be measured solely by the number of customers acquired. The quality of customer

relationships is equally important. A business with a large number of one-time customers may be less sustainable than a business with a smaller but loyal customer base that generates repeated purchases and referrals. Loyal customers can also become informal ambassadors of the enterprise. Through word-of-mouth communication, online reviews and social media recommendations, satisfied customers can influence the purchasing decisions of prospective customers.

For young entrepreneurs who may have limited advertising budgets, customer advocacy can provide a relatively cost-effective mechanism for expanding market awareness.

9. Customers and Digital Business Transformation
The emergence of digital communication has transformed the way SMEs interact with customers. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, websites, email and e-commerce platforms provide opportunities for businesses to communicate directly with existing and prospective customers.

Digital platforms can enable SMEs to:

- promote products;
- receive customer enquiries;
- process orders;
- provide after-sales service;
- collect feedback;
- announce promotions;
- maintain customer communities; and
- build brand visibility.

However, digital presence alone does not guarantee customer loyalty. Businesses must use technology to create genuine value rather than merely increasing promotional messages. The digital customer expects speed, accessibility, responsiveness and consistency. Consequently, SMEs should integrate digital communication into their broader customer relationship strategy.

10. Theoretical Foundation of the Oxygen-Cable Philosophy
The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy is positioned within established marketing theories while maintaining its own conceptual identity.

10.1 Marketing Concept
The marketing concept proposes that organisations should identify and satisfy customer needs more effectively than competitors while achieving organisational objectives. The oxygen-cable philosophy is consistent with this orientation because it places customer needs at the centre of business decision-making.

10.2 Relationship Marketing Theory
Relationship marketing focuses on establishing, maintaining and strengthening relationships with customers and other stakeholders. The oxygen-cable metaphor reinforces this long-term relational perspective by emphasising continuity rather than one-time transactions.

10.3 Customer Value Perspective
Customers evaluate businesses based on the value they perceive from products and services relative to the costs and sacrifices involved. SMEs must therefore continually create and communicate meaningful value.

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10.4 Service Quality Perspective
Service quality influences customer perceptions, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Reliable, responsive and empathetic service can strengthen the relationship between SMEs and their customers.

These theories provide the established scholarly foundation upon which Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy builds its distinctive metaphor.

11. Conceptual Framework of the Oxygen-Cable Philosophy
The proposed framework positions customers at the centre of SME survival and growth:
Customer Understanding → Value Creation → Quality Service → Customer Satisfaction → Customer Retention → Customer Loyalty → Customer Advocacy → SME Growth and Sustainability
Customer feedback creates a continuous feedback loop that returns the enterprise to customer understanding and value creation.

The framework suggests that customer understanding enables entrepreneurs to identify needs and expectations; value creation allows SMEs to develop products and services that address customer problems; quality service influences customer experience; satisfaction increases the likelihood of retention; retention strengthens loyalty; and loyalty can generate customer advocacy.

Ultimately, these processes can contribute to SME growth and sustainability.
The framework therefore represents the central proposition of Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy: continuous and mutually beneficial customer relationships provide the commercial oxygen required for SME survival and growth.

12. The Distinction Between Traditional Mantras and the Oxygen-Cable Philosophy
The three popular customer mantras and the oxygen-cable philosophy can be distinguished conceptually.

Marketing Expression	Primary Emphasis
Customer is King	Respect, importance and authority
Customer is God	Supreme value and reverence
Customer is Always Right	Listening and customer consideration
Customers are Oxygen Cables	Survival, continuity, revenue, relevance and growth

The distinction is important. The king metaphor emphasises status; the God metaphor emphasises reverence; and the "always right" expression emphasises customer consideration. The oxygen-cable metaphor, however, emphasises the continuous commercial dependence of SMEs on customers.

This distinction represents the central conceptual contribution of Dr Joseph Obele's philosophy.

13. Managerial Implications for Young Entrepreneurs
The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy provides several practical lessons for young entrepreneurs.
First, entrepreneurs should listen before selling. Customer needs should be understood before products are developed or aggressively promoted. Second, entrepreneurs should understand before producing. Production decisions should be informed by evidence of market demand rather than assumptions. Third, entrepreneurs should satisfy before seeking loyalty. Loyalty cannot be demanded; it must be earned through consistent value and positive experiences. Fourth, entrepreneurs should retain before continuously acquiring. While customer acquisition remains

important, existing customers should not be neglected. Fifth, entrepreneurs should protect customer relationships. Complaints and negative feedback should be treated as opportunities for improvement rather than personal attacks. Finally, entrepreneurs should recognise that customer orientation does not mean accepting every customer demand. Professional customer management involves balancing customer interests, business sustainability, ethical standards and profitability.

14. Proposed Customer-Centric Principles for SMEs

The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy can be summarised in ten principles:
1. Know your customers.
2. Understand their needs.
3. Create meaningful value.
4. Deliver consistent quality.
5. Communicate effectively.
6. Respond to complaints promptly.
7. Use feedback to improve.
8. Build long-term relationships.
9. Reward customer loyalty.
10. Never take customers for granted.

These principles provide a practical framework through which SMEs can translate customer orientation into daily business practices.

15. Discussion

The central contribution of this paper is the development and articulation of Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers as a conceptual framework for understanding customer dependence in SMEs. The philosophy does not claim that customer orientation, relationship marketing or customer satisfaction are new areas of marketing scholarship. Rather, its originality lies in the oxygen-cable metaphor and the conceptual integration of customer patronage, revenue, feedback, market relevance, retention and business survival within that metaphor. The strength of the metaphor lies in its emphasis on continuity. A king metaphor focuses primarily on status and authority, while a religious metaphor focuses on reverence. The oxygen metaphor focuses on the continuous flow of an essential resource. Nevertheless, the metaphor should not be interpreted as suggesting that customers possess unlimited power over businesses. Customers and businesses participate in an exchange relationship in which both parties seek value. SMEs must therefore serve customers ethically and professionally while protecting their financial sustainability. The philosophy also provides an opportunity for further academic investigation. Future empirical studies can examine whether SMEs that demonstrate stronger customer orientation, CRM practices, customer satisfaction and customer retention achieve superior business performance. Researchers may also operationalise the Oxygen-Cable Philosophy as a measurable construct and investigate its applicability across different SME sectors, geographical regions and economic environments.

16. Recommendations

Based on the conceptual arguments presented, the following recommendations are proposed:
1. SME owners should adopt customer-centric business strategies that place customer needs at the centre of product, pricing, promotion and distribution decisions.
2. Entrepreneurs should establish appropriate CRM systems that enable them to manage customer information and interactions.
3. SMEs should systematically collect customer feedback and use it to improve products and services.

4. Customer complaints should be treated as business intelligence, rather than simply as negative events.
5. SMEs should prioritise customer retention alongside customer acquisition.
6. Entrepreneurs should leverage digital platforms to strengthen communication, service delivery and customer engagement.
7. Business education programmes should teach customer relationship management as a core entrepreneurial competence.
8. SMEs should balance customer satisfaction with profitability, recognising that sustainable customer service requires a financially viable business model.
9. Entrepreneurs should build trust through integrity and consistency, because customer relationships cannot be sustained through promotion alone.
10. Further empirical research should test Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy across different sectors and SME environments.

17. Conclusion

Customers occupy a central position in the survival, sustainability and growth of SMEs. A business may possess products, capital, employees, equipment and an attractive location, but without sufficient customer demand, these resources cannot guarantee long-term survival. The popular expressions "Customer is King," "Customer is God," and "The Customer is Always Right" communicate important lessons about customer importance and respect. However, Dr Joseph Obele's Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers shifts the discussion toward the fundamental issue of business survival and continuity. The philosophy proposes that customers are the continuous commercial oxygen cable of SMEs because their patronage generates revenue, provides market intelligence, sustains business relevance, strengthens relationships and supports growth. The concept therefore moves beyond merely telling entrepreneurs to respect customers. It reminds them that customer relationships must be continuously maintained and protected because they constitute a vital connection between the enterprise and the market. Young entrepreneurs must attract customers, understand them, serve them, satisfy them, retain them and continuously create value for them.

The ultimate lesson is simple:
"Customers are not merely kings to be served or gods to be worshipped; they are the oxygen cables that keep SMEs alive."

A product may start a business, but strong and sustainable customer relationships help keep the business alive and growing.

Therefore, entrepreneurs must not only serve their customers but also protect the relationships that keep their businesses breathing.

The Oxygen-Cable Philosophy of Customers, developed and authored by Dr Joseph Obele, provides a practical and memorable customer-centric lens through which entrepreneurs, educators and researchers can examine the relationship between customers and SME survival, sustainability and growth.

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