

ENHANCING CUSTOMER ACQUISITION THROUGH CREATIVE COMMUNICATION IN PERSONAL SELLING: A CASE STUDY OF PT TIRTA ASASTA DEPOK (PERSERODA)

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the role of communication creativity in personal selling strategies to increase the number of customers in the Marketing Team of the Regional Water Company Tirta Asasta Depok in 2024. The method is an exploratory case study. Primary data was collected through interviews and direct observations, while secondary data was gathered from literature, company documents, and previous research. The theoretical framework includes Computer-Mediated Communication, Social Exchange Theory, and Media Convergence Theory. The research findings show that communication creativity in personal selling involves utilizing media convergence tools such as laptops, WhatsApp, email, and Zoom to interact and negotiate with customers. This strategy is further enhanced by offering rewards, providing gifts, and using motivational narratives to build relationships. It also includes delivering more comfortable services with improved negotiation management and collaborating with local authorities to expand outreach. As communicators, neat and polite appearances, along with the use of "lip service" to create comfort and trust play significant roles. However, communication barriers were negative customer perceptions regarding new connection fees, public corporate image, and the skepticism toward government-owned enterprises. The findings indicate that creativity in communication can effectively enhance customer acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Water is an essential resource for all living beings, and human demand for water continues to increase over time. In Indonesia, water is sourced primarily from two main sources: groundwater and piped

water supplied by municipal drinking water companies. According to data from PERPAMSI (the Indonesian Water Supply Companies Association) in 2024, there are currently about 317 piped water companies managed by local governments.

Uniquely, water management authority in Indonesia is governed by Article 33, Paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution, which states that water and natural resources are controlled by the state for the prosperity of the people. This legal foundation justifies the involvement of both central and regional governments, as well as State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and Regional-Owned Enterprises (ROEs), in the management of the Drinking Water Supply System (SPAM).

As part of the state's control and management of water, each region is granted the authority to establish its own regional water company. In the Jabodetabek area, several drinking water companies are managed by local governments, including PAM Jaya in Jakarta, Kahuripan Pakuan in Bogor, Tirta Asasta Depok in Depok, Vits Tirta Benteng and Tirta Kertaraha in Tangerang, as well as PDAM Patriot and PDAM Bhagasasi in Bekasi.

While the fact that these companies are majority-owned by local governments provides advantages in terms of licensing and operations, they still face challenges in marketing their products. One of the main challenges is that consumers have the right to choose their source of clean water. Additionally, economic factors, infrastructure, trust, service, marketing team credibility, and water quality all pose significant challenges for these drinking water companies.

Each regional water company faces different marketing challenges depending on its service area. Therefore, marketing teams in each company must be creative in overcoming these obstacles. For example, PT Tirta Asasta Depok (Perseroda), hereinafter referred to as PT TAD, divides its marketing team into two sub-divisions: the domestic team and the non-domestic team. Each team targets different customers, faces different problems, and requires different communication strategies.

Although the number of non-domestic customers is lower than that of domestic customers, their contribution to

the company's revenue is very significant. For instance, according to documentation from the Company Development Department in January 2024, PT TAD recorded a company revenue of IDR 13,380,984,700, with non-domestic customers contributing 35.5%, or approximately IDR 4,756,299,907 (<https://tirtaasastadepok.co.id/>) (Anonim, 2024). This data underscores the importance of effective marketing strategies to increase the number of non-domestic customers in order to support overall company revenue.

Marketing communication is the method used by companies to inform, build, and enhance relationships with consumers, either directly or indirectly, regarding the products and brands they offer. In certain contexts, this communication reflects the strength of the company and its brand (Kotler, P., & Keller, 2016). According to (Bitner, M. J., & Zeithaml, 2016), marketing communication tools include advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, publicity/public relations, personal selling, events and sponsorship, interactive/internet marketing, social media marketing, and mobile marketing.

In facing dynamic market challenges, PT TAD still heavily relies on personal selling as its primary strategy. Personal selling is a marketing communication method that involves direct interaction between the salesperson and the prospective buyer, aiming to influence the purchasing decision (A. Shimp, 2014). Moreover, personal selling is considered an effective method for building long-term relationships with customers. Personal selling involves six steps: prospecting and qualifying, pre-approach, presentation and demonstration, handling objections, closing the sale, and follow-up and maintenance.

However, the success of this method largely depends on the creativity in communication used by the marketing team. Creativity in communication is key in personal selling, especially when facing the challenges and changes of a dynamic market.

In this context, creativity refers to the ability to design and deliver sales messages in a unique, attractive, and effective way that not only captures customers' attention but also builds long-term relationships with them (Daud, G., & Simamora, 2022).

The obstacles to creative communication in sales include a lack of confidence when delivering the message, the inability of personal selling to integrate various sources for effective communication, and insufficient preparation to respond to feedback from prospective buyers (Habibah et al., 2023).

The novelty of this research lies in three main aspects: first, it analyzes how personal selling is creatively used to address the challenges of changing public mindsets; second, it highlights the use of personal selling not only for commercial purposes but also to build long-term public awareness; and third, the research focuses on a regional-owned company that has unique strengths due to the lack of competitors, providing a "power" element in the marketing communication mix.

This research focuses on how communication creativity can be applied in personal selling to increase the number of non-domestic customers at PT TAD. It also identifies the types of obstacles that may be encountered in the implementation of personal selling strategies at PT TAD.

The purpose of this research is to uncover, describe, and explain how communication creativity for the personal selling method can be used to increase the number of customers within PT TAD's non-domestic marketing team, through the lens of a 2024 Case Study. This research can contribute to the development of communication science implementation and serve as a recommendation for the marketing divisions in similar service companies.

METHOD

This research adopts the constructivism paradigm, which posits that individuals strive to understand their

diverse worlds, requiring researchers to explore these understandings deeply. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes the analysis of the meaning of social actions through direct observation, viewing reality as a social construct that is not always quantifiable (Creswell, 2018).

This research uses a case study research method with a qualitative approach, conducted in a natural setting without manipulating the research object. The focus of the case study is the exploration of phenomena, making it a type of research that cannot be adequately captured through surveys (Chowdhury, Anup & Shil, 2021). Case studies can be descriptive, illustrative, experimental, exploratory, or explanatory. This research adopts an exploratory case study to examine the marketing communication practices at PT Tirta Asasta Depok (Perseroda), particularly in personal selling.

The research object refers to anything that becomes the focus of study or analysis, which can be abstract concepts, physical objects, or social entities (Miles, M.B, Huberman, A.M, & Saldana, 2014). This research focuses on the communication model, creativity in marketing communication within the personal selling method, and the communication process applied by PT Tirta Asasta Depok (Perseroda). This research object is analyzed using group communication concepts related to social exchange theory, CMC theory, and convergence theory. Informants in this research were purposively selected based on the depth of information needed, including several staff and customers of PT Tirta Asasta Depok (Perseroda).

Data in this research were collected through two techniques: primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through interviews and direct observations of informants, while secondary data were collected from literature, company documents, and previous research (Sugiyono, 2013). Qualitative data analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion

drawing. The reduced data were systematically arranged to answer the research questions.

Data presentation was done in the form of brief descriptions, charts, or diagrams to facilitate understanding. Conclusions were drawn based on the research problem formulation, with re-verification to ensure data validity. Data validity was reinforced through source triangulation, external validity techniques, dependability, and confirmability to ensure that the research results can be trusted and applied in different situations (Achmad Fauzi et al., 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

PT Tirta Asasta Depok (Perseroda), or PT TAD, is a company owned by the Depok City Government, responsible for providing clean water to the local community and contributing to regional revenue. The company envisions becoming the best drinking water company with excellent service and environmental awareness. The company's mission includes improving customer service coverage, financial performance, and active participation in environmental preservation and regional economic growth.

The Non-Domestic Marketing and Customer Service Division at PT TAD is responsible for achieving sales targets and new connection targets while ensuring that all non-domestic customers receive adequate services. To this end, marketing strategies are carried out using personal selling methods.

According to PT TAD's non-domestic marketing team, when communicating to implement personal selling methods to increase the number of their customers, they use communication technology such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Email, and laptops. This aligns with December's (1996) statement that CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) is the process of human communication through computers involving people in a specific context using media for various purposes.

When conducting personal selling, PT TAD's Non-Domestic Marketing Team strives to win over potential customers by giving them hand gifts such as cakes, goody bags, umbrellas, or mugs to those willing to accept the marketing team's presentation. This is in line with the social exchange theory assumption, which states that every individual strives to maximize rewards and minimize costs, with the principle of exchange between rewards and costs serving as a measure. Therefore, the outcome of a relationship is determined by the balance between the rewards obtained and the costs incurred (Smith, 2021).

The first material presented by PT TAD's non-domestic team to potential customers is the importance of groundwater conservation. This aims to align the perspective with potential customers regarding the use of piped water as better than groundwater from the standpoint of environmental sustainability and health. In line with the function in the communication convergence process, it involves reducing individual understanding to a limited understanding for mutual agreement. This process involves stages such as scene setting, forming mutual understanding, and resolving conflicts that may arise during negotiation (Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, 2021).

Interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in the personal selling activities conducted by PT TAD's Non-Domestic Marketing Team. They prefer to meet with a single representative of a potential customer so they can directly offer a solution tailored to their needs and observe the customer's verbal and non-verbal reactions. A neat appearance and casual language use are key strategies in establishing effective interpersonal communication. Additionally, they ensure that their facial expressions and body language are friendly and polite to create a positive impression during the interaction.

(Subandi & Sadono, 2018) mentions that creativity in marketing communication is the ability to find communication methods

by presenting fresh and attractive methods for materials that are no longer appealing to clients and for goods that are no longer needed by consumers. The "jemput bola" approach and promotions like free registration and giving goody bags to potential customers are examples of creative communication aimed at attracting new customers and increasing water sales. (Aryani & Fatmawati, 2021)

PT TAD implements a marketing communication mix that includes various elements such as product, price, location, promotion, and public relations. Each element is adjusted to the characteristics and needs of customers, such as providing detailed price information and ensuring service access is easily accessible. This communication mix is designed to support effective marketing strategies and build long-term relationships with customers (Kotler, P., & Keller, 2016)

In supporting effective marketing strategies, PT TAD uses various integrated marketing communication tools, including advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, and personal selling. Each tool is chosen to achieve specific objectives, such as publicizing company activities through local media or conducting free registration promotions. These tools are used synergistically to increase brand visibility and attract more customers.

Based on (Kotler, P., & Keller, 2016) six steps of personal selling, PT TAD's Non-Domestic Marketing Team carries out a process that includes prospect identification, initial approach, presentation, handling objections, closing sales, and follow-up. Although most of these steps are well implemented, the team still faces challenges in customer follow-up and flexibility in responding to objections related to connection costs. Efforts to continually improve this process are necessary to increase sales effectiveness and customer satisfaction.

Personal selling at PT TAD involves direct interaction with potential customers who often face challenges such as objections

to connection costs or water quality. To overcome this, the marketing team relies on persuasive and adaptive communication strategies but still encounters obstacles such as limited authority to negotiate and rigidity in the cost structure offered.

The obstacles faced by PT Tirta Asasta Depok's Non-Domestic Marketing Team (Perseroda) in increasing the number of customers through the personal selling method include the perception of potential customers regarding the cost of new water connections. According to Social Exchange Theory, a good relationship is created if the rewards received are greater than the costs incurred. However, in practice, potential customers feel that the cost of new water connections is too high compared to the benefits obtained, especially when compared to the free use of groundwater. This causes doubts and rejection among potential customers to subscribe.

Communication convergence and divergence theories are also used to understand how potential customers respond to the offers made (Adwimurti et al., 2022). Some potential customers agree to switch from groundwater to PT Tirta Asasta's water because they understand its benefits. However, some remain with groundwater due to differences in views and values they hold. This condition illustrates the challenges in reaching an agreement that benefits both parties.

Interpersonal communication carried out by the marketing team is often hindered by several personal and cultural factors. For instance, defensive attitudes and negative prejudices of potential customers towards the marketing team make them close off from the start. Additionally, cultural barriers such as language differences and values held by potential customers further complicate the communication process. The marketing team also often faces physical barriers such as limited communication access, as potential customers only provide office phone numbers instead of personal numbers, hindering the follow-up process.

Environmental obstacles also significantly disrupt the marketing process. The marketing team often lacks adequate time and place to present the product in detail. For example, offering products in rushed situations or uncomfortable locations reduces communication effectiveness and the customer's understanding of the offered product.

Lastly, creativity in marketing communication is also hampered by several internal company factors. Excessive emphasis on logic-analytics without providing room for negotiation, pessimism in facing problems, and fear of risks make it difficult for the marketing team to innovate. Therefore, a more flexible and innovative approach is needed to overcome these obstacles and improve the effectiveness of the personal selling method in attracting more customers.

CONCLUSION

PT Tirta Asasta Depok's (Perseroda) Non-Domestic Marketing Team has applied various communication theories in their marketing strategy to increase effectiveness in reaching potential customers. One of the theories used is Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), where technologies such as WhatsApp, email, and Zoom are utilized to facilitate more efficient communication with potential customers. The use of this technology allows the marketing team to deliver messages quickly and accurately according to customer communication preferences, which mostly favor using the WhatsApp application.

In addition, the Social Exchange Theory, which emphasizes the principle of rewards and costs in social relationships, is also applied by PT TAD's marketing team. They use the strategy of giving gifts as an incentive for potential customers willing to accept their presentation offer. This approach not only aims to create a positive initial relationship but also ensures that the subscription costs incurred by customers each month can offset the initial costs spent by the company. This shows how social

exchange strategies can help the marketing team maximize benefits and minimize losses in attracting new customers.

The Convergence Theory by D. Lawrence Kincaid is also the basis for PT TAD's marketing team's communication approach, especially in negotiations and socialization with potential customers. Through this approach, the team strives to unify perceptions and mutual understanding between the company and potential customers by starting communication from issues of mutual interest, such as groundwater conservation. This convergence process involves delivering offers, deep dialogue, and conflict resolution to reach mutually beneficial agreements, demonstrating the importance of effective communication in achieving business goals.

However, in practice, PT TAD's marketing team also faces various external and internal obstacles. External barriers include potential customers' negative perceptions of the cost of new connections, which are considered expensive, and negative stereotypes about the sales profession. Meanwhile, internal obstacles include a lack of flexibility in negotiations and technical constraints in the field. Therefore, although communication theories have been well implemented, creativity and support for innovation are still needed to overcome these obstacles and achieve success in marketing efforts.

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