

Success Factors of Franchise Entrepreneurs Operating in a Volatile Business Environment: A Case of the Fast Food Industry Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Franchising plays a pivotal role in sustainable economic development through employment creation, improving the standards of living and increasing the growth of entrepreneurship world-wide. However, the volatile business environment in Zimbabwe has a negative impact on the growth businesses. Some franchise entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe have not allowed the negative business environment to stop them from realising their business goals. The current volatile business environment has pushed them to work harder and bring out their best in order to succeed with their franchise business ventures. The aim of the study was to uncover the success factors of franchising in a volatile business environment in Zimbabwe. Ten qualitative interviews were successfully conducted with franchise entrepreneurs using face to face semi structured interviews as a data collection method. Thematic coding was used to analyse the collected data. The results of the study reveal that franchise entrepreneurs have taken considerable measures to control their operating costs, motivate employees and retain their loyal customers, hence, they have managed to survive in the present volatile business environment. The empirical findings of the study indicate that, some franchise entrepreneurs find it easy to raise capital for their growth and expansion ambitions, incur lower rental charges and easily find convenient places to locate their businesses. This is largely due to the fact that they operate internationally well recognised, managed and invested franchise brands.

Key words: Survive, growth, business ventures, collected data, ambitions, volatile business

INTRODUCTION

Franchising as a business model is making significant inroads in small to medium size business development in Zimbabwe, since, the adoption of the multicurrency by the government. The franchising business model is a basically a pre-packaged business with established policies and procedures for entrepreneurs (Charles, 2011). According to Sanghavi (1998) it has been proven that the development of franchising depends on the overall economic and political circumstances of the country and that its growth can be significantly impacted by the performance of the economy as a whole. The current business environment is very volatile characterised by political and economic instability making it difficult for franchise entrepreneurs to operate their businesses normally.

The World Bank projected that Zimbabwe could be headed for negative growth by 2016 if no measures are taken to halt the decline of the economy. Zimbabwe's economic growth has slowed down sharply, since, the year 2012 and the 2016 growth rate is projected to remain

constant to the 2015 one which stood at 1.5% (World Bank, 2016). The decline in the growth rate is also aggravated by the global economy slow down with commodity prices remaining depressed and the deteriorating Zimbabwe's terms of trade. Zimbabwe is in the throes of deflation caused by a decrease in the demand for consumer goods and falling prices with retail businesses, especially those offering non-essential products reporting a slump in demand. Conducting businesses in Zimbabwe's volatile business environment is not very easy but however, little is known about how franchise entrepreneurs have managed to be resilient and make their business survive under the present conditions. It is against this background that this study investigated the success factors of franchising in the fast food industry. Therefore, we pose the following research question.

What are the critical success factors for franchising in the fast food industry in a business environment? There has been limited academic research on franchising in the developing countries especially in Zimbabwe. Research

on fast growing spots and international franchising companies such as KFC, McDonalds, Wimpy and Debonairs Pizza in developed countries has been conducted but a little done in developing countries. This leads to an information gap prompting research in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Therefore, the study is important to all potential entrepreneurs who wish to operate businesses in through the franchise business model in volatile business environment.

Literature review: The environment is a major force that influences how entrepreneurs operate. Zimbabwe's volatile business is a threat to franchised fast foods owners due to the intense competition and harsh overwhelming business climates.

Nieuwenhuizen *et al.* (2008), defines the business environment as the sum total of all the factors and variables which influence the establishment, growth and continued existence of the business positively and or negatively, thereby promoting or hindering the achievement of the business's objectives. Franchise entrepreneurs and the business environment they operate in Zimbabwe are not closed systems and therefore, they influence each other. According to Ehlers *et al.* (2010), organisations cannot be successful if there are not in step with their operating environments. Franchise operators in the fast food industry in Zimbabwe interact with their environment which means that franchising entrepreneurs act as an open system and are both affect and be affected by the environment. Therefore, franchise entrepreneurs draw inputs such as human, physical, financial and information resources from the environment and distribute their products and services back to the environment (Ehlers *et al.*, 2010).

Nieuwenhuizen *et al.* (2008), argues that the business environment is divided into three components, namely the micro, market (task) and the macro sub-environments with each sub-environment having several variables that influence the business positively or negatively. The micro environment variables and factors occur internally and are influenced in a direct or indirectly way by the decisions of management and the management has complete control over them (Nieuwenhuizen *et al.*, 2008). The key variables in the micro environment include the business mission, goals, various management functions and business resources (Nani, 2011). These factors have a great influence on the establishment, growth and the continued existence of the businesses. The market (task) environment is encountered immediately outside the business. The key variables in the market environment are customers, workers, suppliers, intermediaries, professional bodies and entrepreneurs. All these variables create challenges and success factors for entrepreneurs.

The third sub-environment is the macro environment. The macro environment consists of the following distinct sub-environments: the political, economic, sociocultural, technological, legal, ecological and the international sub-environments. Zimbabwean Franchise fast food entrepreneurs are facing a very turbulent environment which is not very easy for them to operate their businesses. The Zimbabwe's business environment is very hard to predict due to the ever changing government's legislation pertaining to how business should operate and its influence on the economy through the monetary and fiscal policies.

Overview of the fast food industry in Zimbabwe: Ozcelik (2007), defines fast food as ready to eat dishes sold by commercial establishments that may not have on site dinning accommodation. Fast food retail outlets in Zimbabwe are sit-ins and take away providers whereas some are take away providers only. With the sit-ins, the customers buy food and eat the food within the shop premises. Generally, these outlets have a sitting area in which the customers can sit down and eat their food on the premises of the service provider whereas with takeaways the customers do not eat inside the premises of the service provider. Zimbabwe's commercial fast foods include sadza and beef or chicken, French fries, roasted chicken, pizza, hamburgers, pies, doughnuts and ice creams.

International franchise outlets such as Steers and Nando's (operating under Innscor), KFC, Mugg and Bean, Chesa Nyama and Wimpy operate in the fast food industry in Zimbabwe. There are 13 Nando's branches and 7 Steers branches operating in Zimbabwe (Innscore, 2013). Mugg and Bean, a South African fast food outlet, entered the Zimbabwean fast food market in 2013 and has 5 branches in Zimbabwe and has plans to open more branches (Anonymous, 2015).

Innscore (2013) has been the dominant player in the fast food industry for many years before the coming on board of chicken slice, TN grill, soul food, African fried chicken, chesa nyama and chicken spot in Zimbabwe. The entrance of these new competitors increased competition in the fast food market. Competition among fast foods retail outlets means that consumers are spoilt for choice and in a bid to outplay each other, some companies have embarked on massive promotions (Masawu, 2014). Competition has also seen most food outlets significantly slashing prices as well as introducing new menus and promotions. In an unexpected move, Chicken Inn introduced sadza on their menu, a development which people in the food industry interpreted as a desperate measure to capture customers that were served by small food outlets (Tagwirei, 2013). The sadza which is

served with tomato and onion soup, costs USA \$2 with one chicken piece and USA \$3,50 with two chicken pieces. According to Tagwirei (2013), Chicken Inn launched the dollar meal promotion which has seen pieces of chicken or a standard size of chips going for USA \$1 from the previous USA \$2.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative design was used in this study. The qualitative research approach was ideal, since, it best captured the experiences of the entrepreneurs concerned, highlighted their narratives, perceptions and the success factors experienced by the franchise entrepreneurs for operating in a volatile business environment. Ten participants took part in the study. The study followed a census approach, hence, no sample size was drawn for the study. The majority of the fast food franchise outlets are multi owned. For example Vinal investments owns and operate all Mugg and Beans, two Ocean Baskets, News Cafe's and Smooch outlets in Zimbabwe located in Harare whilst all the Creamy Inn, Fish Inn, Inn Express Nando's and Steers outlets are owned by Innscor Group and the 3 KFC branches are owned by Country Bird Holdings (McCrea and Pinchuck, 2000; Mbanje, 2014; Innscor, 2013). This therefore, made it possible to follow the census approach for this study during the data collection phase.

Face to face semi-structured interviews were used to collect data as they vividly captured the views of the participants through the use of an interview guide. This data collection method was ideal as it provided the researcher the opportunity to probe further and get the finer details of the feelings and perceptions of the respondents. A thematic analysis research method was used to analyse the transcribed interviews from the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nature of employees employed: All the franchise operators expressed that they employ a mixture of permanent and contract employees because of the prevailing economic environment. Many businesses in Zimbabwe are understood to be failing to meet their payrolls in time because of constrained sales revenue and cash flows. As a result fast food entrepreneur employ a mixture of permanent and contract employees in order to reduce their wage bills which in turn reduce their operating costs. The contract employees only report to work during peak hours and days of the month in order to meet the higher levels of demand. This is evidenced by the responses from the respondents.

"It's mixed. The branch managers are employed permanently and some of the sales assistants but we also employ part-time employees whose services are requested during the festive season, weekends and month ends"

In support of the above responses another responded mentioned that:

"Its 50-50. I mainly employ my executive workers together with branch managers, cooks and a few sales assistants as permanent workers whilst I employ general workers such as cleaners and few sales assistants on contract due to the unpredictable economic environment in our country"

The excerpts are a testimony that employing a mixture of permanent, contract and part time workers is a strategy that is used by franchise operators to reduce their wage bills and reduce their operating costs. The findings are in agreement with Kokemuller (2015), assertion that one of the benefits of employing part time employees is that it leads to lowering the costs for the business, hence, franchise entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe's have adopted this cost strategy. Part time workers are paid hourly wages according to the number of hours they would have worked for the business and they usually do not receive additional benefits as compared to permanent employees. Therefore, franchise businesses are saving a lot of money by employing part time members as compared to employing full time employees who are entitled to receive full compensation benefits. This helps their businesses to survive in the prevailing business environment.

Good franchise brand perceptions: All franchise operators expressed that their customers are generally satisfied with their brands. The following remarks were captured about how franchising operators think their customers perceive their brands:

"I think our customers and Zimbabweans generally are well satisfied with our meals and services that accompany our meals as evidenced by the high turn out by customers during lunch hours, weekends and month ends"

The remarks are an indication that Zimbabwean consumers are generally satisfied with the meals and services that are offered by the franchise operators in Zimbabwe. This can be attributed to the high quality of meals that the franchise operators are offering to consumers which influence them to continue craving for fast meals. This is testified by the following remarks

captured regarding to what influences consumers to have the above perceptions regarding to the brands of franchise entrepreneurs:

“The appearance of our shops on their own are very attractive, we have comfortable sitting areas which make our customers feel at home when enjoying their meals furnished with the state of art chairs and tables accompanied by good customer care and high quality delicious meals”

The above findings confirm that products include more than just tangible goods. Complete products include physical objects, services, events, persons, places organisations, ideas or a mixture of these entities. Although, the main centre of attraction of the fast foods are the prepared meals however, the broadly defined meals of the fast food outlets include the tables and chairs where customers can sit in enjoy their meals and also wait to receive their meals. Despite the unfavourable economic conditions which continue to strain consumer’s disposable income and therefore, reducing their spending on luxurious fast food meals the designs, layouts and quality of meals play an important role in luring customers to spend their income on their fast food meals in Zimbabwe’s volatile business environment.

Localisation of meals: All of the respondents expressed that they have localised some of their meals in-order to accommodate the Zimbabwean population. The localisation of meals helps to attract a wide range of customers and give them a wide variety choice of meals to choose from when purchasing their meals. It also makes the customers to develop a feeling that the fast food entrepreneurs are committed to fulfilling their unlimited wants. The following remarks were made:

“Yes we have localised our meals in-order to cater for the majority of the Zimbabwean population”

The respondents indicated that they have the following meals that have been localised:

“We have the Chesa Nyama and sadza at News Cafe every Saturday something you will not find in Chesa Nyamas in South Africa”. “We have the street wise pap a meal that you will not find in European countries”

“Our sadza meals have an option of getting the green fried vegetables an option that is only available in Zimbabwe”

Franchise operators in Zimbabwe have localised some of their menus in-order to accommodate the Zimbabwean population staple food. Sadza, meat and vegetables are the most preferred meals by Zimbabweans, hence, the franchise operators realised that they had to include them as part of their menus in their outlets.

These findings concur with Cox and Mason (2007) and Dada *et al.* (2012), assertion that in making their products uniform throughout the whole nation and even with regional countries franchisee operators are allowed to make a balance to ensure that their products meet the needs of the markets they operate as they are familiar with these markets by localising some of their meals. This strategy ensures that the diverse needs of a market are satisfied without compromising the standardisation of the brand of the franchise system. For example chicken Inn introduced sadza in their meals as it forms the staple diet of the Zimbabwean population. This strategy led to the attraction of more customers who used to buy sadza meals from small sadza serving fast food outlets.

High quality menus and feedback: All of the respondents expressed that offering high quality menus is helping to survive in Zimbabwe’s volatile business environment. The following was captured during the interviews:

“We always strive to meet their expectation by offering them high quality meals at affordable prices, offer them a wide range of appealing meals to choose from and offer platforms for them to give us their feedback on the range of the meals we offer them, service experienced through face to face conversations with branch manager, emails and hotlines”

The statement shows that quality plays a pivotal role in satisfying the needs of customers in the fast food market as the food does not only become delicious but becomes enjoyable to eat. This assertion is corroborated by Mboweni-De (2008) who explained that quality is one of the diverse ranges of drivers, motives, reasons and factors for determining the popularity of the fast food outlet. This in turn results in repeated purchases from the customers with some even becoming advocates for the business. When a customer in the fast food industry enjoys a meal he or she is willing to spread the word to friends and relatives about the good meal enjoyed and wishes his or her friends and relatives to taste the meals and have the same experience with them. Offering a wide range of meals encourages customers to buy more from the same shop as they do not become bored of buying the same meal at all times. Communication is a very important tool that should be used by businesses with particular reference to franchise operators as it helps them to keep

in touch with its customers. The importance of feedback was further emphasised by one of the respondents who indicated that:

“I am personally related to my clientele. I am often in my branches not necessarily supervising my staff but really trying to figure out what are my client’s experiences about all the services rendered to them in the restaurants”

The clearly shows how customer feedback is important in the fast food industry. It is through feedback that unsatisfied needs of customers are identified. Maintaining good communication with customers enables businesses to retain their customers and leads to customer loyalty. The findings concur with Quek (2010), assertion that the key method to find out what customers like or dislike is to directly ask them for feedback and suggestions and incorporating them into future products or service enhancements. The ability to listen to one’s customers and then take actions to meet their evolving needs is the key differentiator for a winning business in Zimbabwe’s volatile business environment.

Opportunities to open more branches: The majority (90%, n = 9) of the respondents expressed that the fast food industry is still yet to be fully exploited in Zimbabwe despite the present volatile business environment. The following remark was captured:

“There is a need to increase our retail outlets countrywide and offer a wide range of meals that are appealing to every Zimbabwean. The business has not fully grown and we have not yet gained popularity in some of the cities such as Gweru and Kwekwe”

The excerpt above confirms that there are still ample opportunities that exist in the franchise fast food market as some of the franchise brands are still yet to open more branches country wide. The above responses also prove that franchise entrepreneurs have ample opportunities to grow their businesses by opening more branches to ensure that their meals are reachable country wide. This is in line with the recent study by Chirara (2015) which indicated that Country Bird Holdings (operating 3 branches in Harare) owners of the KFC are convinced that the initial demand and support for their stores in Harare is encouraging despite economic challenges still experienced in the country and are betting on setting up 25 other outlets in Zimbabwe. Chirara (2015), further indicated that the owners of Vinal Investment are very optimistic about the growth and success of their business

as they believe that people always have to meet and eat and going into the future people would eat more. Therefore, the Zimbabwean fast food industry has a large enough unsatisfied needs that must be satisfied by franchise fast food entrepreneurs. To enormously prove that opportunities exists in the fast food industry, a respondent made the following remarks:

“We still have a market for our restaurants as we are going to open 4 new branches in the next 10 coming days at once. Two restaurant shops which are the simple Asia and the Ocean Basket at Avondale, News Cafe and Simple Asia at Fife Avenue shopping complex. We are also transforming a corner place to open a new restaurant at Arundel shopping mall which is an Old Hurst that used to be a Chinese place”.

The above is a testimony that they are ample opportunities for quality and good dining international and local franchising restaurants to open more branches in the prevailing volatile business environment. International franchising restaurants have greatly been received by Zimbabwean customers as they get the opportunity to enjoy the meals they crave for and buy when they usually travel across the borders, especially when they travel to South Africa.

Affordable rent expenses: About 30% (n = 3) of the respondents expressed that the rent charges are very affordable for their businesses. The following remarks were captured:

“We pay reasonable rents charges for most of restaurants mainly due to the fact that many property developers and landlords are asking us to locate our restaurants within their shopping malls. For example, old mutual has approached us and indicated that they will build whatever, we want and other property owners have indicated we must come and locate at their premises at negotiable rent charges”.

It can be concluded that some franchise operators have bargaining powers over their land lords and property developers which enable their business to incur lower rental expenses. This enables them to enter into favourable lease property agreements with the property developers and landlords. This therefore, affords an opportunity to incur lower operating costs.

Only 20% (n = 2) of the respondents indicated that they build their own premises where they operate from and therefore, they only pay affordable rent charges to the city council. The following comment was captured:

“Some of our restaurants are located in the buildings that we have personally built as the business and this has greatly reduced our rent expenses”

These proves that buying your own business premises saves the entrepreneurs a lot of money. Furthermore, it gives the franchise operators the freedom to use and alter the premises according to their designs and shop layouts. In most cases franchise operators have to ask landlords for permission before they tailor the building according to their franchise brands standards designs and shop layouts. Owning the businesses premises from which the business operate from provides a certainty that the business will operate from the same premises for a longer time. This is endorsed by Smith (2015) study which emphasised that the same cannot be true for franchise operators who are renting the premises they operate on as they need cash reserves to potentially fund the cost of relocating to new premises and their businesses are exposed to rental escalations which affect their cash flow.

Maintenance of the franchise system standards: All the franchisor expressed that maintenance of the franchise system through monitoring and controlling franchisees help them to succeed in Zimbabwe’s business environment. The following remarks were captured:

“We properly train our franchisee’s, staff to ensure that they know all the processes of running a franchised retail outlet under our brand name. We hold monthly meetings with our franchisees together with their branch managers. All our franchisees and their branch managers report to our operations manager who visit each branch within our franchise network weekly”.

In support of the above another respondent indicated that:

“We have a standard quality requirement which our franchisees and their manager know; we hold meetings regularly with the franchisees and their branch managers. We also do assessment checks at any time unexpectedly on every branch”.

It can be deduced that training, holdings meetings with franchisees and their managers and conducting quality inspections play a pivotal role in maintaining and controlling franchise restaurants to ensure that all the branches maintain the systems standards. The findings

are in agreement with Khan (2014), explanation that nothing can beat the impact of face to face meetings with the franchisor and the franchisee as it affords an opportunity to the franchisor to get first-hand information on how the franchised business are operating. Training franchisees and their employees ensures that they gain enough knowledge on how to run the restaurants according to the franchise brand system standards and it also provide them with a better understanding of the systems philosophy. Holding meetings with the franchisees and their branch managers help in updating every franchisee to be aware of what is happening in the franchise business system. It is through these meetings that the franchisees operating in Zimbabwe’s fast food industry get an opportunity to share their ideas and assist each other to ensure that their businesses maintain their system standards.

Capital for growth: Only 20% (n = 2) of the respondents indicated that their business had enough capital to grow by mentioning that:

“The franchise brands that I operate make enough money for themselves to finance the opening of other branches. For example when I opened the second branch of Mugg and Bean in Borrowdale, 80% was from the proceeds of the Mugg and Bean Borrowdale first branch. I have been approached by many financial institutions that are willing to roll out franchising vision for franchising in Zimbabwe. I got approached by News Cafe, Ocean Basket and Simple Asia to open their branches in Zimbabwe, hence, I do not worry about where I get money for my business”.

These statement shows that some franchise operators are not facing challenges in raising and accessing funds to expand their businesses in the prevailing volatile business environment. Their businesses make enough money for themselves that they use their retained earnings to finance the growth of their businesses. From this it can be concluded that well managed and performing businesses attract investors and as such they do not struggle to raise to capital funds as their brand image of the businesses sell itself, hence in the process attracting investors to invest in the business.

Affordable costs of labour: Only 20% (n = 2) of the respondents felt that the labour costs they incur in their franchised brands are very affordable to their business. The interviews revealed the following:

“When I opened my first franchise I assembled the best trained young Zimbabweans whom some of them I had trained from 2003-2010 when I was still working in the hospitality industry and some who had gone for further training in best catering and hospitality schools in South Africa, Switzerland, France United Kingdom and Australia. These young people were based across the globe and I had to convince them to come and join my franchise ventures”.

The above is clear testimony that well performing franchise restaurants who hire highly qualified and experienced employees are well rewarded by the input of these highly skilled and experienced workers. These make them to have a competitive edge over their rivals. This is also a clear indication that a good team made of best high qualified, skilled and experienced workers in the fast food industry helps to build a good brand that market itself, hence in the process recovering all the expenses incurred by the business including the salaries and wages of workers. The findings are in agreement with Kanchana *et al.* (2013)’s explanation that a strong team with high skills and experience is a necessity for building a successful business and it is also the duty of entrepreneurs to make sure that their teams see the same future with them. The assembled team must believe in possibilities and passionate about making that possibility a reality.

CONCLUSION

Employing a mixture of permanent and part time employees in the fast food industry help businesses to reduce operating costs in a volatile business environment. Franchise entrepreneurs do not need to focus on the quality of meals alone but on the overall services that they render at their fast food branches. Localisations of fast food meals by local and international franchise brands help to attract more customers as it offers customers a wide variety of meals to choose from when they are purchasing. The ability to maintain the same higher standards of quality at all branches helps the business to have a sustainable competitive advantage over its rivals. Franchise entrepreneurs who run international and well managed franchise brands have bargain power over their landlords and property owners and therefore, they negotiate favourable rental charges with their landlords.

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