



ISSN: 0975-833X

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Effect of Ethical Treatment towards Customers on Enterprise performance in Mumias Sugar Belt, Kenya

\*<sup>1</sup>Otuya W. I., <sup>2</sup>Onyango M. A., <sup>3</sup>Ofafa G. A., <sup>4</sup>Ojera, P. B. and <sup>5</sup>Wachana R. S.

<sup>1</sup>School of Business and Economics, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

<sup>2</sup>School of Business, Bondo University College,

<sup>3</sup>School of Business, Kenyatta University

<sup>4</sup>School of Business and Economics, Maseno University

<sup>5</sup>School of Mathematics, Maseno University

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2012

Received in revised form

15<sup>th</sup> December, 2012

Accepted 22<sup>th</sup> January, 2013

Published online 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2013

Key words:

Ethical treatment towards customers,  
Enterprise performance,  
Mumias sugar belt.

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the role of ethical treatment towards customers in enhancing enterprise performance. In this study respondents are the farmers contracted to Mumias sugar company which subcontracts cane transport services to private cane haulage companies. A total of 138 questionnaires were distributed and 100 were returned. To test the conceptual frame work, a structural equation modeling to analyze the data was done. In this regard, frequencies, correlations and binary logistic regression were used to establish the relationship between ethical treatment to customers (farmers) and enterprise performance. Findings revealed that ethical treatment indicators are predictors of enterprise performance among cane transport companies in Mumias sugar belt.

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INTRODUCTION

Ethical business is a set of principles that govern the action of an individual or group in an enterprise, (Baughn *et al.*, 2007). Ethical business is concerned with truth and justice and includes aspects of which society expects for instance fair competition, social responsibilities and corporate ethical business behavior (Welford, 2005). Ethical business practices refer to actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law (Mc Williams and Siegel, 2001). Specifically ethical business practices suggest that the enterprise identify its stakeholder groups and incorporate their needs and values within its strategic operation and decision making process Hatman *et al.* (2006). This concept encompasses the moral responsibilities that businesses have to the societies within which they operate (Hartman *et al.*, 2006).

The extensive debate and research concerning whether ethical business is or is not profitable indicates that most do not define ethical business as only those initiatives that are beyond profits, but that it includes both profitable and unprofitable initiatives which have social benefits. This definition of ethical business inherently goes beyond Langtry's (1994) minimalist and non-minimalist pure stockholder ethical theories. However, it is consistent with both his "tinged stockholder theory," where "firms should be run to maximize the interests of stockholders, subject not only to legal constraints but also to moral or social obligations" and to an intrinsic view of non-shareholder stakeholders as described by Berman *et al.* (1999). MSEs across the world exhibit a variety of ethical business practices principles, policies and practices (Baughn *et al.*, 2007;

Kusku and Zarkada-Fraser, 2004) with different levels of intensity (Welford, 2005; Maignan and Ralston, 2002). However questions still linger as to what explains the similarities or differences in ethical business across countries, why ethical business practices change over time and what explains these changes. These unexplained questions justify the reason why a study should be carried out in Kenya to establish the status of ethical business practices among MSEs. It is only in the last decade that business ethics scholars have made concerted effort to expand their research to countries other than the United States (Oumlil *et al.*, 2009). One country that has been getting a lot of attention of economists, business professionals, and politicians is China (Lu, 2008). It produces nearly half the world's goods and products. In less than a quarter-century since Deng Xiaoping initiated his "open door policy," China has become one of the most powerful and unpredictable force in the economic world. Its enormous pool of cheap labor and untapped market has attracted billions of dollars from multinationals all over the world and lifted over 250 million out of poverty since 1978. Today, China has the largest trade surplus with the United States and is one of the largest holders of U.S. treasury bills. In addition, it is expected to overtake the United States' gross domestic product by 2039 (Chandler, 2004). However, in the recent past, the "Made in China" label has taken a severe beating. Recent revelations of defective products from China like melamine-contaminated foods, and toys contaminated with lead paint have raised concerns about social responsibility in China (Gallagher, 2009; Lu, 2008).

Companies in Kenya display different understandings and levels of commitment to ethical business as demonstrated by the issues they prioritize and the range of ethical business processes they employ (Muthuri *et al.*, 2010). Evidently philanthropic responsibilities feature highly on the ethical business practices agenda and unlike Carrol's (1991) ethical business practices pyramid, philanthropy takes a

\*Corresponding author: willisotuya@yahoo.com

higher priority than legal responsibilities in Kenya. The need for focused ethical business practices research on cane haulage in Kenya is critical particularly with the concern that current approaches to ethical business practices, with their origin in developed countries, “may not sufficiently relate or respond to the context and circumstances encountered in developing economies” (Hamann, 2006). As we know it, developing countries do not share the same cultural and social values, norms and priorities that underpin ethical business practices in ‘western’ nations (Jamali and Mirshak, 2007).

### Literature review

Ethical treatment of customers (farmers) and business performance  
A study was carried out by Webster (1992) to identify customer/business relationships. His study maintained that it is critical for firms to make long-term commitments to nurturing customer relationships with quality, service, and innovation because such relationships influence the firms output. This study however did not highlight the specific outcomes of ethical treatments on customers. Our study filled the gap by clearly spelling out performance indicators. Similarly, Deshpandé, (2000) did a survey on customer orientation as a measure of ethical treatment to customers. Their studies identified customer orientation as “the set of beliefs that puts the customer’s interests first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders such as owners, managers, and employees, in order to develop a long-term profitable enterprise.” They established that an important implication of customer orientation is its significant relationship to key marketing outcomes and business performance. This study was however biased towards marketing outcomes in retail outlets rather than focusing on performance indicators which the proposed study seeks to fill.

In a related study Slater and Narver (1994) concluded that those businesses that devote significant resources to understanding their customers and competitors and coordinate the activities of the different functions of the business for an integrated value-creation effort are rewarded with superior profitability, sales growth, and new product success relative to other firms. However, Slater and Narver (1994) did not regard sugarcane farmer as a customer and recipient of ethical treatments from sugar cane transporters, a gap which will be effectively be covered by this study.

Cragg, (2002) and Lorraine *et al*, (2004) carried out a study to establish the effect of cooperate revealed ethics on the financial performance of the firm. Their study revealed that cooperate ethics enhanced the appeal of the firms share. When a firm discloses its ethical values and objectives on it’s cooperate statements it equates them in importance to other organizational goals. The study further reveal that ethics provides a clear signal about the stance and beliefs of the firm reducing uncertainty about future actions and long-term risks. Their study further established that ethical business may be a valuable tool to create intangible assets like good corporate image and enhanced reputation, which can be sources of competitive advantage. However these studies were not carried out in a Kenyan setting to capture ethical practices in the sugar industry, a gap which the proposed study seeks to fill. These studies did not clearly identify the stakeholder recipient of ethical treatments by business firms. This study clearly identifies the customer as the recipient of ethical treatments.

Staelin, and Zeithaml, 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). In their study Cronin and Taylor (1992) focused solely on repurchase intentions, whereas Boulding *et al*. (1993) focused on the elements of repurchasing as well as the willingness to recommend. In the study by Cronin and Taylor service quality did not appear to have a significant (positive) effect on repurchase intentions (in contrast to the significant positive impact of satisfaction on repurchase intention), whereas Boulding *et al*. (1993) found positive relationships between service quality and repurchase intentions and willingness to recommend. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated in accordance with the reviewed literature. *H1: Ethical treatment towards customers has no effect on enterprise performance*

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Questionnaire design

The independent variable (ethical treatment towards farmers) was based on previous research by Logsdon and Yuthas, (1997). It captured a wide range of items relevant to ethical treatment for customers Waddock and Graves (1997). The study also borrowed from SIR: Global profile data sections which are developed to measure the level of firms responsibilities to its customers. The study used the final score provided by SIR which quantified the degree to which the company satisfies the customers interest ranging from; customer involvement in major decision making regarding cane transport, trust in drivers with cane, company general contributions towards community needs and good treatment by cane transport companies. Logsdon and Yuthas, (1997) enlisted these dimensions as measure of customer ethical treatment. The measures were structured on a five point likert scale ranging from 1 = “Not at all” to 5 = To a very large extend.”The measures on employee’s job satisfaction formed part B of the farmers questionnaire.

Dependent variable measures of enterprise performance were based on a study by Oliver (1980) who measured performance based on the respondents perception. This approach was also consistent with Murgolis and walsh (2002) who deviated from the conventional measurement of performance in terms of firm profitability and extended it to social performance with indicators measured purely on perceptions. Murgolis and Walsh (2002) enlisted enterprise reputation, employee commitment, enterprise public image, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty as measures of organizational social performance. This study adopted these dimensions and assessed them on a seven point likert scale ranging from 1= “extremely displeased to 7= “extremely pleased.”

This was intended to capture the extent to which employees were in agreement with statements on good pension scheme, full support to join trade union, promoted since they joined current employer, good work safety facilities, competitive salary package, good job security, employers give local community preference during employment, gender balance during recruitment, employers solve financial problems beyond employees salary, and employers sponsor employees for further training. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale anchored at 1 = “Strongly Disagree” and 5 = “Strongly Agree”. These responses were subjected to a reliability test as reported in Table 1 to ascertain the validity of

**Table 1. Ethical Treatment Towards Farmers Reliability Test**

| [Cronbach’s Alpha = -0.596] (If item dated) |   |
|---|---|
| ETF1*                                       | Farmers involved by cane transport companies in decisions regarding transport service |
| ETF2*                                       | Farmers who have had their cane spilled while on transit                              |
| ETF3  | Farmers trust drivers with their cane (0.317)   |
| ETF4*                                       | Cane transport companies contribute very generously towards community needs           |
| ETF5  | Farmers treated well by cane transport companies (0.125)                              |
| ETF6  | Farmers cane stolen on transit (0.265)  |

Item deleted

In various studies the relationship between service quality and customer preference loyalty had been examined (Boulding, Kalra,

the instrument used to collect the data on the ethical treatment towards farmers. Farmers were asked to rate the extent of agreement

with each statement regarding ethical treatment towards farmers by cane transport company in which responses ranged from "Not at all = 1" to "Very great extend = 5".

From Table 1, there were three items retained which yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 60 percent. These items included Farmers trust drivers with their cane (ETF3), Farmers treated well by cane transport companies (ETF5), and Farmers cane stolen on transit (ETF6). These two items formed the basis for further analysis and this study which measured ethical treatment towards farmers by the cane transport companies.

**Table 2. Farmers Perception on Enterprise Performance Reliability Test**

| Cronbach's Alpha = 0.741 (if item deleted) |  |
|--|--|
| FPEP1                                      | Farmers perception on enterprise reputation of cane transporters (0.711) |
| FPEP2                                      | Farmers perception on employee commitment of cane transporters (0.673)   |
| FPEP3                                      | Farmers perception on public image of cane transporters (0.682)          |
| FPEP4                                      | Farmers goodwill to cane transporters (0.728)                            |
| FPEP5                                      | Farmers perception on customer loyalty of cane transporters (0.666)      |

From Table 2, the five items yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 74 percent and all were retained since none of these indicators could improve the Alpha value if deleted. Thus, the five indicators for measuring farmers' perception on enterprise performance were used in the subsequent analyses.

### Data analysis

To assess direct relationships among studied variables, the study utilizes response frequencies, pearson correlations and logistic regression based on [Kenny and Barron \(1986\)](#) four steps. The tested relationship of Ethical treatment to customers and enterprise performance reported for the hypothesis was step one of [Kenny and Barron \(1986\)](#) steps.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Descriptive statistics

#### Farmers perspective of ethical treatment towards customers

Ethical treatment towards farmers on enterprise performance was evaluated on the basis of farmers' perspective to address the main study objective. This information was useful in examining whether the content of ethical treatment towards farmers had a relationship with enterprise performance. Thus, the results in this section were based on the following ethical treatment indicators; Farmers involved by cane transport companies in decisions regarding transport service, Farmers who have had their cane spilled while on transit, Farmers trust drivers with their cane, Cane transport companies contribute very generously towards community needs, Farmers treated well by cane transport companies, and Farmers cane stolen on transit.

The responses were analyzed on a 5-point Likert scale, that is, No at all (NA), To a small extend (SE), Neutral (N), To a great extend (GE), and To a very great extend (VGE) with values 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively and reported in Table 3. It can be observed from Table 3 that majority of the farmers were in agreement with statements regarding Farmers involvement by cane transport companies in decisions on transport service, Farmers trusting drivers with their cane, Cane transport companies contributing very generously towards community needs, and Farmers treated well by cane transport companies.

However, most of them did not approve statements on Farmers who have had their cane spilled while on transit and Farmers cane stolen on transit. The perception of farmers on cane transport enterprise performance based on the main objective, helped determine whether the content of ethical treatment towards farmers had a relationship with their perception of cane transport enterprise which was performance. The indicator included Farmers perception on enterprise reputation of cane transporters, Farmers perception on employee commitment of cane transporters, Farmers perception on public image of cane transporters, Farmers goodwill to cane transporters, and Farmers perception on customer loyalty of cane transporters. A 7-point Likert scale was used in capturing these response having Extremely Displeased (ED), Displeased (D), Slightly Displeased (SD), Neutral (N), Slightly Pleased (SP), Pleased (P) and Extremely Pleased (EP) with corresponding values of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 respectively. The results were displayed in Table 4 For all the five indicators in Table 4, it was observed that most farmers had negative opinion on the enterprise performance of cane transporters

### Hypothesis testing

H<sub>101</sub>: Ethical Treatment towards farmers (customers) has no Effect on Enterprise Performance. To test this *hypothesis*, the correlations and the binary logistic regression models were used to establish whether there was a relationship between the ethical treatment towards farmers (independent variables) and enterprise performance factors (dependent variables). The results were displayed in Table 5. In Table 5 there were two indicators of ethical treatment towards farmers, that is, farmers trust drivers with their cane (ETF3) and farmer's cane stolen on transit (ETF6) that had a significant relation with the enterprise performance indicators i.e. farmers' perceived; reputation of cane transporters (FPEP1), goodwill to cane transporters (FPEP4) and customer loyalty of cane transporter (FPEP5).

**Table 3. Frequencies of responses on ethical treatment towards farmers**

| Statement   |   | NA   | SE   | N   | GE   | VGE  | TOTAL |
|---|---|------|------|-----|------|------|-------|
| Farmers involved by cane transport companies in decisions regarding transport service | F | 284  | 62   | 2   | 1    | 1    | 350   |
|   | % | 81.1 | 17.7 | 0.6 | 0.3  | 0.3  | 100   |
| Farmers who have had their cane spilled while on transit                              | F | 1    | 1    | 1   | 155  | 192  | 350   |
|   | % | 0.3  | 0.3  | 0.3 | 44.2 | 54.9 | 100   |
| Farmers trust drivers with their cane   | F | 189  | 136  | 11  | 13   | 1    | 350   |
|   | % | 54.0 | 38.9 | 3.1 | 3.7  | 0.3  | 100   |
| Cane transport companies contribute very generously towards community needs           | F | 233  | 110  | 6   | 0    | 1    | 350   |
|   | % | 66.6 | 31.4 | 1.7 | 0    | 0.3  | 100   |
| Farmers treated well by cane transport companies                                      | F | 208  | 123  | 9   | 8    | 2    | 350   |
|   | % | 59.4 | 35.1 | 2.6 | 2.3  | 0.6  | 100   |
| Farmers cane stolen on transit  | F | 39   | 34   | 31  | 101  | 145  | 350   |
|   | % | 11.1 | 9.7  | 8.9 | 28.9 | 41.4 | 100   |

Source: Survey Data 2012

Table 4. Response of farmer perception on enterprise performance

| Statement  |   | ED   | D    | SD   | N    | SP  | P   | EP  | TOTAL |
|--|---|------|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Farmers perception on enterprise reputation of cane transporters | F | 135  | 67   | 89   | 49   | 4   | 6   |     | 350   |
|  | % | 38.6 | 19.1 | 25.4 | 14.0 | 1.2 | 1.7 |     | 100   |
| Farmers perception on employee commitment of cane transporters   | F | 102  | 122  | 83   | 18   | 18  | 7   |     | 350   |
|  | % | 29.1 | 34.9 | 23.8 | 5.1  | 5.1 | 2.0 |     | 100   |
| Farmers perception on public image of cane transporters          | F | 113  | 109  | 78   | 45   | 5   |     |     | 350   |
|  | % | 32.3 | 31.1 | 22.3 | 12.9 | 1.4 |     |     | 100   |
| Farmers goodwill to cane transporters                            | F | 148  | 114  | 69   | 9    | 7   | 3   |     | 350   |
|  | % | 42.3 | 32.6 | 19.7 | 2.5  | 2.0 | 0.9 |     | 100   |
| Farmers perception on customer loyalty of cane Transporters      | F | 133  | 95   | 64   | 13   | 19  | 23  | 3   | 350   |
|  | % | 38.0 | 27.1 | 18.3 | 3.7  | 5.5 | 6.6 | 0.9 | 100   |

Source: Survey data 2012

Table 5. Pearson Correlation (p-value)

| Ethical Factor | Enterprise Performance Indicators |                   |                   |                      |                      |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                | FPEP1                             | FPEP2             | FPEP3             | FPEP4                | FPEP5                |
| ETF3           | 0.315<br>(0.000)***               | 0.057<br>(0.291)  | -0.025<br>(0.647) | 0.228<br>(0.000)***  | 0.052<br>(0.330)     |
| ETF5           | -0.029<br>(0.583)                 | -0.048<br>(0.375) | -0.021<br>(0.700) | -0.029<br>(0.583)    | -0.066<br>(0.219)    |
| ETF6           | -0.037<br>(0.485)                 | 0.012<br>(0.821)  | 0.079<br>(0.141)  | -0.150<br>(0.005)*** | -0.196<br>(0.000)*** |

\*\*\* P-value &lt; 0.01

Table 6. Baron and Kenny Steps Logistic regression models

| Step | Path | Estimate | 95% CI |        | Beta   | p-value |
|------|------|----------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
|      |      |          | Lower  | Upper  |        |         |
| 1    | C    | -0.143   | -0.218 | -0.067 | -0.196 | <0.001  |

Source: Researcher 2012

This offers preliminary rejection of Hypothesis ( $p < 0.056$ ) and not  $p$  less than 0.05. These relationships were subjected to Baron's assumptions and results were reported in Table 6.

According to Table 6, step 1 of Baron and Kenny (1986) passed. This suggests that there was evidence that ethical treatment towards farmers on cane theft while on transit was related to farmers perceived customer loyalty of cane transporters ( $P < 0.05$ ). As a result, the null hypothesis H101 was rejected and the alternative accepted. This result is consistent with a similar study by Webster, (1992); who carried out a study to identify customer/business relationships and established that ethical business has an impact on overall performance. Similarly, this study finding corroborate well with a study by Deshpande, Farley and Webster, (1993); who wanted to establish a relationship between customer orientation as a measure of ethical treatments to customers and performance indicators. They established that an important implication of customer orientation is its significant relationship to key marketing outcomes as business performance. Similarly this study is consistent with results obtained by Slater and Naiver, (1994); who concluded that those businesses that devote significant resources to understanding their customers and competitors and co-ordinate the activities of different functions of business for an integrated value creation effort are rewarded with superior profitability, sales growth and new product success relative to other firms.

However this study slightly varies with the findings of Slater and Naiver, (1994); in the sense that the later measure performance in financial outcomes rather than social outcomes fronted by this study. Results in our study also compare well with findings by Cragg, (2002) and Lorraine *et al.* (2004) who carried out a study to establish the effect of corporate revealed ethics and financial performance of the firm. Their study revealed that cooperate ethics enhanced the appeal of the films share. Similar to our findings, Lorraine *et al.* (2002); revealed that ethics provides a clear signal about the stance and beliefs of the firm reducing uncertainty about future actions and long term risks. Consistent with this study's, their study revealed that ethical business maybe a valuable tool to create

intangible assets like good corporate image and enhanced reputation which can be sources of competitive image. Similarly this result is inconsistent with results of another study by Warde (2000) who argued out that ethical initiatives to customers justified on strategic basis are in fact unethical and unlikely to provide economic benefits because an ethical stance is hard to fake when its underlying motivation is the profit maximization. A similar study by Hillman and Keina (2001) states that participating in social and ethical issues in regard to customers may adversely affects to firms profitability to create shareholders wealth. The sharp variance in these outcomes could be attributed to the fact that to previous studies measure performance in terms of financial outcomes contrary to performance in terms of social outcomes which cannot be quantified and given financial values.

Most likely the consistence in results of these studies on the correlation between ethical gestures to customers and enterprise performance could be attributed to the fact that customers who are treated well will always plan repeat purchases which translates into higher profitability. Lorraine *et al.* Compounds this position by insisting that ethical business particularly to its customers may be a valuable tool to create intangible assets like good corporate image and enhanced reputation which can be a source of competitive advantage.

However, this study finding vary with a study by Cronin and Taylor, (1992); who reported that customer ethics did not seem to have a significant effect on enterprise performance. This variance could be explained by the fact that their study measured enterprise performance using financial indicators, while these study performance indicators were customer loyalty, reputation of cane transporters and goodwill to sugarcane transporters.

### Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions made for this study are drawn from summary of findings. In line with hypothesis H101 this study concluded that farmer's trust in drivers with their cane had a positive correlation



with farmers perception of enterprises reputation and farmers goodwill to cane transporters. In views of this hypothesis the study further concludes that farmers cane stolen in transit was negatively correlated with farmers good will to cane transporters. This means that when farmers trust in company drivers increases the company reputation decreases. In view of this hypothesis the study further concludes that farmers cane stolen in transit was negatively correlated with farmers good will to cane transport companies. This means that when cane theft in transit increases the good will of farmers towards transporters decreases. In summary, ethical treatment to farmers indicators are predictors of enterprise performance. From this study it can be observed that the independent variable for main objective assesses ethical treatments among farmers in the sugar subsector as the major customers of transport companies. It is suggested future research should incorporate ethical treatment by businesses to their customers in other sectors.

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