

## **SOFT SKILLS FOR RETAILING OF NATIVE AFRICAN ARTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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### **Abstract**

*Visual arts of native Africa – modern and historical sculpture, painting, pottery, textiles, masks, personal decoration - are natural, beautiful, appreciated and patronised by people all over the world. However, the fact that many of the local artists who create these works have not shown improved economic status over time is an indication that they are not selling their products effectively. Thus, it appears that the artists possess the technical skills required to create the arts but do not have the soft skills required to attract and sustain buyers, negotiate effectively and sell their works at sufficient profit. This study identified the soft skills for effective retailing of African arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Subjects were 124 artists and retail workers drawn from local art galleries that sell African arts in Lagos. The subjects responded to a 28-item questionnaire on soft skills for effective retailing of African arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The respondents also provided information about their age, sex, arts retailing experience and type of art. Analysis of data was done using percentages, mean and standard deviation. The results obtained revealed that the retailers agreed that most of the identified soft skills in areas of communication; critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, negotiation and follow-up were required but not possessed by them. This finding call on art schools, faculties and institutions to integrate the teaching of the soft skills into their curriculum. It also underlines the need to organize workshops and seminars to help practicing teachers of art as well as African arts retailers to enhance their soft skills.*

**Keywords:** African Arts, Retailers, Soft Skills, 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## Introduction

African traditional art including sculpture, painting, pottery, textiles, masks, personal decoration possess rich, diverse aesthetic properties as well as unique characteristics that are attractive to people from different parts of the world. African arts have been in existence for centuries. The earliest art of the African continent - excluding the controversial Stone Age quartzite figurine from Morocco known as the Venus of Tan-Tan (200,000-500,000 BCE) - consists of the engravings in the Blombos Caves on the Cape coast of South Africa, dating from 70,000 BCE, followed by the animal figures from the Apollo 11 Cave in the Huns Mountains of southwestern Namibia, dating from around 25,000 BCE (Izevbigie, 2000). African art has impacted arts in other continents, for example, it refreshed and inspired pioneers of modern European art painters such as Pablo Picasso, André Derain and Amedeo Modigliani; and sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Henry Moore. (Chanda, 2008; Meggs, 1992). African artists, are still being called upon to generate visual communication that reflect s the identity of the African continent (Lange, 2001). The arts are usually multifunctional, serving for religion, economics and entertainment among others. Whatever reason for the arts, they are created by artist and most times, sold to the users.

The concept of selling to users, also known as retailing, is important in the art world given that it is a function that links artists to the consumers of their products. Retailing typically includes all the activities involved in selling products or services directly to final consumers for their personal, non-business use (Kotler and Keller, 2015). Thus, a retailer is a business that sells products and services to ultimate consumers (Dibb, Simkin, Pride & Ferrell, 1994:317). Arts retailing can be non-store or in-store. It is non-store when the sale activities performed outside a store such as door-to-door or street selling of arts. It is in-store when sale activities are performed within a retail facility such as a store or an art gallery. This study focuses on in-store arts retailing.

Arts retailing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not just about selling beautiful art works and making profits. It is more about customer relationship management, satisfying customer needs and solving problems (Jobber & Lancaster, 2009). It is also about ethics, trust and adapting to change. Unlike few decades ago, consumers are now educated and more informed owing to the explosion in ICT that makes available an ever-widening

range of information from authoritative sources. In addition, customers now interact with increasing number of retailers – in-store, on street and online and have generally become choosier and more assertive, exerting control over purchasing and consumption decisions unlike few decades ago when they were passive recipients of retailers' offers (Kanu, 2017).

In light of the above, artists require a new skills set for effective arts retailing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the technical skills for creating the works and the traditional retailing skills such as displaying the arts attractively remain critical and fundamental to success, retail workers must also possess some important soft skills. The term 'soft skills' is used to indicate all the competences that are not directly connected to a specific task but are necessary in any position as they mainly refer to the relationships with other people (Cimatti, 2016). Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) provide a similar definition of soft skills as a collection of people management skills. They emphasise that soft skills are not synonymous with attitudes or values. Thus, in this study, soft skills are behavioural competencies that relate to dealing with people such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving and negotiation. These skills are not necessarily new but they have become basic requirements for succeeding in retailing African Arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since retailing involves dealing directly with customer, retailers will be more successful if their retail workers can communicate effectively, negotiate appropriately and collaborate with customers to achieve their shopping objectives (Kanu, 2017).

In spite of the role that good levels of soft skills could play in aiding arts retailing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education and training of artists and retail workers in art stores do not seem to integrate these important skills. One likely reason for excluding the soft skills is the confusion about what exactly to integrate. Indeed, soft skills such as, collaboration and critical thinking are highly dimensional and the dimensions that apply to arts retailing have not been fully identified and integrated into Art Education and training programmes. Thus, many artists and art retailers do not have the skills required to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century customers. Some artists and workers in arts retail stores cannot communicate effectively with customers using the right words, tone and body language. Some cannot listen attentively and ask appropriate questions to aid their understanding of customers' needs. Instead, they cut customers short and use languages that are not only poor and confusing but deliberately

deceptive and manipulative. Some cannot collaborate with customers to achieve their shopping goals and negotiate appropriately to create a win-win situation for them and their customers.

Meanwhile, art customers are usually not low class people who are constrained by money and distance. Thus, as poor customer relationship skills become more and more unacceptable to them, they seek out other alternatives which includes buying African arts physically or over the internet from other continents such as Europe and America. Thus, African artists find it difficult to sell their works to high-profile customers. In fact, many African artists end up selling their works to art collectors who pay a little amount and later, sell at a high profit. In light of the foregoing, this study identifies the soft skills required by in-store retailers of African arts for inclusion in education and training of artists and their retail workers.

## **Method**

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in Lagos because the State has the most retail facilities as well as the most organized retail structure in Nigeria (Business Day Intelligence, 2014). Subjects were 124 artists and retail workers drawn from local art galleries that sell mainly African arts in Lagos. The art retailers were identified through physical visits. During the visits, the researchers enquired from the retailers about their tenure in retailing African arts. Retailers who did not have up to 3 years retailing experience were excluded from the study. Stratified random sampling was used to select 124 art retail workers of 45 art stores proportionally from 3 shopping malls (The palms, Ikeja mall and Leisure mall) and three hotels (Eko Hotel, Southern Sun and Sheraton). A maximum of three retail workers were selected from each store. The subjects were randomly picked if such workers were more than three in a store.

A 4- point likert-type structured questionnaire adopted from Kanu (2017) was used for the study. The adapted questionnaire was validated by two experts in Fine Arts, two experts in Marketing and one expert in Psychology. It consisted of two sections (A and B). Section A comprised four items that solicited personal information about respondents (age, sex, years of African arts retailing experience, and educational background) while Section B comprised 22 items on soft skills in communication, critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, negotiation and follow up.

Respondents were requested to indicate the degree to which the skills were required by checking (i) Highly required (ii) Required (iii) Not required (iv) Highly not required. The questionnaire was pre-tested using 20 retail workers in Enugu who had up to three years African arts retailing experience. The pre-test results showed no ambiguity in the instrument and produced a Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient (for internal consistency reliability) of 0.88 for section B.

The questionnaire was administered by the researchers and 2 research assistants based in Lagos. The assistants were engaged to enhance timely distribution and collection of questionnaires. Prior to the data collection exercise, the research assistants were briefed on the research objectives as well as when and how to approach the subjects in order to get their cooperation. In addition, they were taught to explain the individual items on the questionnaire should the subjects require explanations. Ninety-eight (98) copies of the questionnaire were eventually retrieved, representing 79% retrieval rate. Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation were used to analyse the data collected. For section B, any item with mean value from 2.50 and above were considered required while items with mean value less than 2.50 were considered not required. All computations were done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16.0.

## Results

The results of the study are presented in the table below.

**Table 1:** Respondent demographics and characteristics (Respondents N=98)

<b>Sex</b>	%
Male	77
Female	23
<b>Age range, years</b>	
18-25	48
26-35	19
36-40	31
41-50	2
<b>Years in African arts retailing</b>	
less than 5	42
5 to 10	26
More than 10	32
<b>Role</b>	
Artist and retailer	44
Retail worker	56

**Table 1:** Mean responses of retail workers on soft skills required for successful personal selling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

S/N	Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remark
	<b>Communication</b>			
1	Holding effective oral conversation with customers	3.57	0.37	Required
2	Creating high-impact messages to aid selling	3.58	0.51	Required
3	decoding customers' non-verbal cues	3.41	0.48	Required
4	Tailoring words and tone to customer needs	3.75	0.61	Required
5	Listening attentively to customers	3.58	0.56	Required
6	Asking open-ended questions to get information from customers	2.24	0.68	Not Required
7	Engaging customers on social media platforms such as <i>facebook</i> , <i>instagram</i> and <i>twitter</i>	4.58	0.37	Required
8	Sharing good quality images of art works on social media	2.51	0.76	Required
9	Explaining the meaning of an art to customers to enable the customer take a decision	3.22	0.58	Required
	<b>Critical thinking</b>			
10	Seeking clear understanding of customers' situation before talking about products	3.61	0.51	Required
11	Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information provided by customers	2.54	0.51	Required
	<b>Collaborative Problem solving</b>			
12	Respecting customers' beliefs	3.89	0.66	Required
13	Helping customers achieve their shopping objectives by allowing and helping in trials among other measures	3.54	0.71	Required
14	Responding quickly to customer complaints	3.62	0.46	Required

15	Advising customers to return arts (after payment) if they are not suitable for their purpose	2.50	0.67	Required
16	Effectively handling objections raised by customers	3.52	0.48	Required
	<b>Negotiation</b>			
17	Reaching a favorable win-win resolution with customers	3.42	0.62	Required
18	Stressing value for money rather than price	3.70	0.59	Required
19	Improving customer relationship while negotiating	3.13	0.63	Required
20	Cheerfully allowing customers to walk away if no favourable agreement is reached	3.50	0.54	Required
	<b>Follow-up</b>			
21	Appreciating customers for their patronage	3.71	0.51	Required
22	Requesting feedback to ensure that customers are satisfied with the purchase	2.58	0.72	Required
23	Visiting places where the arts used to ensure they are well suited or satisfying to customers			
24	Remembering customers' important events and sending greetings	2.11	0.61	Required

Table 1 shows that only item 6 (Asking open-ended questions to get information from customers) has mean score below 2.50. This indicates that all the skills are required for effective selling of African arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century except item 6.

## Discussion

The finding that holding effective oral communication was highly required is consonant with the body of knowledge in retailing (e.g. Van Staden, 2004; and Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn, 1995). Good quality artworks do not sell themselves all the time. Artists and their retail workers need to communicate with customers to create awareness, stimulate recognition, and provide information to help customers

evaluate the arts, present and demonstrate the arts and encourage them to make a purchase decision. These set of activities require strong oral communication skills to perform successfully.

The findings that listening attentively to customers, handling objections presented by customers and tailoring words and tone to customers' needs and are required, align with Marshall, Goebel and Moncrief (2003) who found that listening skills, verbal communication skills, ability to adapt sales style from situation to situation; and ability to overcome objections are among the top ten success factors in selling. The finding that asking open-ended questions to get more information from customers is not required was not expected given that effective and appropriate questioning allows the seller to get adequate information that would enable better satisfaction of customers' needs.

The high mean scores of the items in the negotiation cluster is not in consonant with Kanu (2017) whose study showed low mean scores for the items. This may mean that artists and art retailers in the arts industry appreciate the value of negotiation skills in selling more than retailers in other industries.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has endeavoured to identify the soft skills and attitudes required by in-store retailers for successful selling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The aim was to provide clarity about the dimensions of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that relate to personal selling in retail context. The study has identified 19 relevant soft skills related to communication, critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, negotiation and follow-up. The researchers encourage stakeholders in retail education, especially teachers and curriculum planners to weave the teaching of the skills into the teaching of core retail management contents in order to improve the competence of retail workers and ultimately help retail institutions in becoming more competitive and successful.



## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Curriculum organizations and personnel should support innovative changes in fine arts and retail education by reviewing their curriculum to reflect relevant soft skills required by artists and retail workers for successful retailing of African arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. Teachers of fine and applied arts as well as those who educate and train retailers should develop their capacity to teach the required soft skills in the context of core subject topics. Teachers would need to embed the teaching of relevant soft skills into the teaching of the core subject. Teachers should also use teaching techniques that promote 21<sup>st</sup> century skills learning such as group projects, making presentations, etc. Since projects allow students to work in groups, teachers have opportunity to help them become good communicators, team players and respectful people, working with others to solve problem creatively. Teachers should also use interactive classroom instructions and assessment practices that allow students to create their own answers and write extensively can help students and trainees develop relevant soft skills while mastering the core contents.

Researchers in fine arts and retail education should support African arts retail education by developing rubrics to help teachers in assessment of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as well as assist students in developing themselves using the rubrics.

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