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Sustainable Supply Chain: Maintaining a Competitive Advantage in Retail Organizations

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Abstract

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MSA, Central Michigan University, 2003

BSA, Upper Iowa University, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Some retail managers encounter challenges with efficiency and responsiveness in their attempts to gain and maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry. Many retail managers are receptive to changes in global markets, technology, and customer demands. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that some retail managers used to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry. Maintaining a competitive advantage increases profitability and customer satisfaction. Sustainable Supply Chain Management was the primary conceptual framework for this study. The purposive sample consisted of 4 retail managers from a mid-sized retail distribution organization in southeastern Georgia. Face-to-face interviews were recorded, transcribed, verified, and analyzed. Analysis in this qualitative single case study was based on the sustainable supply chain management framework. Four emergent themes were identified relating to essential strategies, ethical factors, risk factors, and the value of sustainable strategy toward stakeholders, suppliers, and customers. Implications for positive social change include retail managers' improved ability to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage, which will allow organizations to sustain their progress in the community and thereby contribute to the success and wellbeing of employees, families, communities, and the economy. Motivated and qualified employees tend to remain with their organizations, which is good for employees and their families, as well as the business, the community, and the economy.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my doctoral study to my beautiful wife Brenda (I love and cherish you for always), my four adorable children, Celestia, Caressa, Lakesha, and Shacoya. You all have been my source of inspiration and strength, I will always love you. To my incredible mother whom I cherish forever, to my father for his strength and wisdom. I know you both are looking down on (me) us with a smile, I love you. To my sisters and brother, you always been an inspiration to me, even when I left for the military; your prayers were always with me, I love you all. Thank you all for the prayers and support, I truly appreciate it and love you all.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Improving the operational strategies of their companies to maintain its competitive advantage has become a priority for many retail managers (Sigalas, Economou, & Georgopoulos, 2013). In retail establishments, the emphasis on motivating sales associates, helping managers to streamline expenses, reducing inventories, minimizing operating costs, and gaining strategic advantages are major concerns. Managers in retail organizations are always seeking ways to develop their strategies to nurture more efficient and successful supply chains (Beske & Seuring, 2014). Supply chain management (SCM) activities focuses on product, inventory, distribution, transportation, information, and cash flows with the objective of maximizing the surplus that results in the difference between the price paid by a consumer and the collective operational costs that accrue throughout the supply chain (Randall, Wittmann, Nowicki, & Pohlen, 2014).

Background of the Problem

Managers in some supply chains encounter challenges with efficiency and responsiveness to dynamic changes in global markets, technology, customer demands, and product lifecycles (Marshall, McCarthy, McGrath, & Claudy, 2015). A supply chain is a network of organizations connected via value chain activities. Value chains are activities in an organization operating in a given industry to deliver products or service to the market (Matopoulos, Barros, & van derVorst, 2015). Successful provision of goods and services by retailers to the public requires the effective integration of sustainable activities across the entire supply chain, thereby allowing a company to sustain a competitive advantage.

Sustainability is among business leaders’ most important management objectives; it is integral to competitive success. In addition, sustainability has become a concern for some business organizations that integrate environmental and social issues in their strategy (Ageron, Gunasekaran, & Spalanzani, 2012). Sustainability is difficult to maintain without implementing sustainable supply chain practices. Sustainability focuses on safeguarding natural resources against exploitation while maintaining productivity and competitiveness.

Business leaders often consider competitive advantage alongside the dimensions of durability, mobility, and replicability (Marshall et al., 2015). Durability is a measure of the ability and resilience of the organization to have situational awareness of its competitors. Mobility is the transfer of resources between competitors in business operations. As sustainable competitive advantage becomes the dynamic interaction between an organization and its external environment, sustainability is more accessible to businesses with more than one dominant strategy because competitors many not have the same options (Marshall et al., 2015).

Problem Statement

Sustainability is a problem for organizations that integrate environmental and social issues without improving operational efficiency to maintain a competitive advantage in business operations (Ageron et al., 2012). A report published by McKinley

& Company, a management consulting firm, indicated that 43% of business organizations lack sustainability strategies in their overall business goals, mission, and values statements (Bonini & Bove, 2014). The general business problem was some organizations lack strategies to motivate their sales associates, which impacts sustainability and results in the loss of profitability. The specific business problem was some managers of retail organizations located in the southeastern United States lack sustainability strategies to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that managers of retail organizations use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. The target population consisted of managers employed at retail distribution organizations in the southeastern United States who have implemented procedures that enabled them to sustain a competitive advantage. Implications for positive social change include retail managers' improved ability to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage, which will allow organizations to sustain their progress in the community and thereby contribute to the success and wellbeing of employees, families, communities, and the economy.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative method for this study because my intent was to explore the business process of sustainability strategies some managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry. The quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study because the study did not involve testing a theory or hypotheses (Hoare & Hoe, 2013). A quantitative method is appropriate for identifying numerical changes in characteristics of a population of interest (Walsh, 2015). The mixed method approach was not appropriate for this study because the study did not involve integrating qualitative and quantitative research data. A mixed method approach is appropriate when the researcher seeks to triangulate data, generate hypotheses, expand on research tools, or combine qualitative and quantitative methods (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

I chose the case study design for this research study. Case study researchers explore events, activities, individual(s), policies, and other systems (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2014). Case study design was appropriate for this study because my focus was on strategies used by some management teams to maintain a competitive advantage. Phenomenological designs were not appropriate for this study because phenomenological studies involve researching the human experience from the perspective of those living the phenomenon (Bentahar & Cameron, 2015). In addition, phenomenological designs are appropriate for inquiring into human experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Annansingh & Howell 2016).

Research Question

I designed the following research question to align with the specific business problem related to the lack of sustainability strategies: What strategies do retail organization managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage?

Interview Questions

1. What sustainable strategies have you used to motivate your sales associates?
2. What ethical factors did you find worked best to motivate your sales associates?
3. How did your sales associates respond to your different motivation techniques?
4. What were some of the risk factors you encountered in maintaining a competitive advantage?
5. What are the methods you used to motivate your sales associates to support sustainability strategies you or other members of your management team implemented in your organization?
6. What value does your sustainable strategy provide to your stakeholders, suppliers, and customers?

Conceptual Framework

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) was the primary conceptual framework for this study. SSCM theory stems from the triple bottom line theory developed by John Elkington (Elkington, 2004). The theory considers economic, environmental, and social goals from a microeconomic perspective (Elkington, 2004). SSCM theory emphasizes the strategic integration and achievement of social, environmental, and economic goals of the organization. In SSCM theory, improving the long-term economic performance of the individual organization and its supply chains are the primary objectives (Touboulic & Walker, 2014). Key concepts are (a) sustainability as part of an integrated strategy; (b) organizational culture involving value and ethics; (c) risk management that includes contingency planning, supply disruptions, and outbound supply chains; and (d) transparency with stakeholders (Touboulic & Walker, 2014). SSCM theory was the appropriate framework for this study because it enabled me to explore managers' perceptions of and experiences with sustainability as an integrated strategy in retail businesses.

Operational Definitions

Business sustainability: Business sustainability is the process by which organizations manage their financial, social, and environmental risks, obligations, and opportunities (Kannegiesser & Gunther, 2014).

Supply chain: Supply chain is a network of suppliers, organizations, production facilities, resources and activities, and technology involved in the creation and sale of a product from the delivery of source materials from the supplier to the manufacturer, through to its delivery to the end user (Mani, Agrawal, & Sharma, 2015).

Supply chain management (SCM): Supply chain management is the flow of material and products across the enterprise and with trading partners; in addition, SCM includes the management of information flows, cash flows, and workflows (Beske & Seuring, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In the following subsections, I discuss the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in the research study. Assumptions are suppositions the researcher believes to be true, but are not verified (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Limitations are restrictions beyond the researcher's control (Jimenez-Jimenez, Martinez-Costa, Martinez-Lorente, & Rabeh, 2015). Delimitations are boundaries or parameters around a research study (Puslecki, Trapcznski, & Staszkow, 2016).

Assumptions

The first assumption was that retail managers value strategies differently and use unique methods of capturing employees' support to maintain competitive advantages. I assumed that participants provided honest responses because I assured them that their responses were confidential. I also assumed that conducting face-to-face interviews and reviewing documents from the organization would provide sufficient data with which to answer the central research question. My final assumption was that this study would be beneficial to retail managers by inspiring them to take an interest in the community and contribute to the success and well-being of their employees and their customers.

Limitations

Limitations are restrictions beyond the researcher's control (Jimenez-Jimenez et al., 2015). One limitation of the study was that my professional background as a logistician while serving in the United States Army might have influenced the research approach and analysis of the data. To reduce bias, as suggested by Wyman (2014), I identified bias and engaged in bracketing, the process of exposing bias. The study included participants from a southeastern United States retail distribution organization in which decision makers implement strategies to maintain competitive advantage; thus, the results may not represent the overall population of organizations.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries around a research study (Puslecki et al., 2016). I limited the scope of this study to managers of retail operations who had knowledge and experience with implementing strategies with their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry. The participants for the study were retail managers with at least 5 years of retail managerial experience. Participants work in retail establishments in southeastern Georgia.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practices

This study is significant in that its results may contribute to business practices by advancing retail business managers’ awareness of how and why other retail business managers direct and motivate their sales associates, streamline expenses, reduce inventories, lower operating costs, and gain competitive advantages (Sigalas et al., 2013). A wrong choice by organizational managers could affect the entire business operation (Cervera & Flores, 2012). Retail managers may benefit from the results by better understanding business strategies that others have used successfully to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage, thereby reducing vulnerabilities and cost (Cabral, Grilo & Cruz-Machado, 2012; Sayogo, Zhang, Luna-Reyes, Jarmin, Tayi, Andersen & Andersen 2015).

Implications for Social Change

Hiring sales associates to fill positions in retail organizations serves an important function in gaining and maintain high quality performance and competitive advantage in the retail industry. Hiring managers can reduce organizational cost by using transition assistance programs as effective hiring strategies (Takatsuka, 2011). Retail organizations include establishments engaged in retailing merchandise, generally without transformation, and rendering services incidental to the sales of merchandise (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Therefore, hiring qualified employees and understanding what strategies retail managers are practicing is essential in maintaining a competitive advantage. Retail business managers can use the findings from this study to improve their techniques of motivating and supporting their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage, thereby allowing the organization to sustain its progress in the community and contribute to the success and wellbeing of employees, families, communities, and the economy.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this qualitative study, I sought to identify what strategies company managers need to maintain a competitive advantage. I explored the strategies influencing productivity and performance using a qualitative exploratory case study of managers in a mid-sized company in southeastern Georgia. Effective leadership is important in retaining experienced employees who may influence productivity and help the company maintain a competitive advantage. In the following section, I review literature related to the research method, SSCM conceptual framework, and business strategies for maintaining a competitive advantage.

I used the Walden University library to retrieve books, journals articles, and dissertations to review. Specifically, I used the library to access Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journals, and ABI/INFORM complete databases. In this review, I reference (a) 62 peer-reviewed journal articles, and (b) 8 journal articles and books that were not peer reviewed. Of these 70 references, 62 (88.5%) were peer-reviewed and published within the last 5 years.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that managers of retail organizations use to motive their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. To maintain competitive advantages in retail operations, senior managers must define strategies, make plans, allocate work resources with subordinate managers, and communicate with staff members and work teams (Marshall et al., 2015). Having an effective supply chain management is foundational for retail operations. Managers with effective supply chains can offer customers high-quality products and services with low prices (Colicchia & Strozzi, 2012).

Sustainable Supply Chain Management Theory

The SSCM theory clarifies the strategic integration and achievement of an organization’s social, environmental, and economic goals in the business processes. The objectives of SSCM theory include improving the long-term economic performance of the individual organization and its supply chains (Touboulic & Walker, 2014). Management teams for supply chain management (SCM) operations must incorporate logistical functions, customer management, and organization among participants (Schaltegger & Bruitt, 2014). The objective of SCM is for managers to enhance the efficiency of the movement of goods and product information from the manufacturers to the customers (Guimaraes & Crespo de Carvalho, 2013; Wamalwa, 2014).

A sustainable supply strategy represents one of the most important success factors for achieving sustainable development within an organization (Cervera & Flores, 2012; Gonzalez, Dabic, & Puig, 2014). Strategies to achieve competitive advantages must start with supply chain managers taking the lead by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to their sales associates to meet business goals, mission, and values. In addition, supply chain managers must take the lead to increase quality, reduce costs, and increase profits by addressing the performance of supplier relations, supplier selection, purchasing negotiations, operations, transportation inventory, and warehousing. Abdallah, Obeidat, and Aqqad (2014) emphasized that most managers see managing their supply base as a key strategic issue.

Supply chain management (SCM). An SCM operation is the logistical configuration and operation of efficient and effective productions within business organizations. SCM is a significant concern for managers working to integrate environmental and social issues without negatively affecting operational efficiency to maintain a competitive advantage in business operations (Ageron et al., 2012; Dong, Huang, Sinha, & Xu, 2014). In retail operations, management teams are aware of the importance of their partners' sustainable responsibility in their development; in addition, environmental sustainability of any organization is impossible without incorporating sustainable SCM practices (Gligor, 2014).

Pursuing a long-term sustainability strategy grants a competitive advantage. Bonini and Bove (2014) emphasized that managers are beginning to integrate sustainability in their organization. Bonini and Bove found that 57% of their respondents indicated that the most integrated areas were mission and values, external communications, and budgeting.

Social Impact

Focusing on the social impact of SSCM theory, Randall, Gibson, Defee, and Williams (2011) investigated supply chain strategies employed by retailers. Randall et al. used a mixed method approach involving 27 top-level managers, supplemented by lower-level employees to obtain approximately 200 completed surveys. The study had a longitudinal component with 2 years of ongoing retail SCM operations. In retail operations, SCM research is an opportunistic extension of manufacturing theory that includes customer product marketing and distribution theory rather than holistic research. Randall et al. used a constant comparative technique to analyze the extensive interview transcripts and organize the results to reveal emergent themes and identify the major issues in retail SCM operations. In this study, the researchers found that senior-level managers provided stability for retailers throughout challenging times.

Organizational performance. SCM improvement programs can enhance elements of performance that can have a positive social impact on and by organizations. Managers who use SCM improvement programs increase performance and supply chain configurations, adding a moderating effect (Caniato, Golinit, & Kalchschmidt, 2013; Hu, Tan & Mohamad, 2016). Some managers have used models to make decisions to optimize plant locations, transportation, capacity, and inventory

Agile strategies help managers improve flexibility and capability to adapt to changing market conditions and customer demand. Barros, Barbosa-Póvoa, and Blanco (2013) investigated what hinders businesses from achieving superior supply chain performance and how retail leaders implement SCM strategies. Barros et al. (2013) focused on three well-established international companies in different industrial sectors: semiconductor, automotive, and pharmaceutical. Applying the empirical case study method for selection of SCM practices to three case studies in different industrial sectors allowed Barros et al. to validate the use of SCM practices and understand their value for managers. Likewise, my study could empower managers and their sales associates to better understand how to select SCM practices appropriate for the contexts and strategies of organizations.

Sustainable strategies. SCM is a central element of corporate strategy and flexibility in the supply chain necessary for competitive advantage (Iyer, Srivastava, &

Rawwas, 2014; Mellat-Parast, 2013). The strategy involves the fundamental coordination of values across the organization, generating processes and business flows in the supply chain that could lead to building partnership capabilities that maximizes customer value and enhance organizational performance. Despite the strategic importance of partnerships, several partnerships fail, resulting in increases to the cost of coordination; these costly failures make market exchanges attractive (Iyer et al., 2014). Iyer et al. (2014) used field surveys to collect data for testing hypothesized partnership failures and used multiple methods to test for non-response and common method biases.

Iyer et al.'s study (2014) revealed the importance of collaboration for higher operational performance outcomes. The opportunity to achieve superior performance motivates managers to engage in extensive collaborative efforts with partners. This relational capability represents a sustainable source of competitive advantage.

In a search for examples of collaborations for operational performance, Schaltegger and Bruitt (2014) investigated and reviewed SCM operations within the context of sustainability in organizations. Previous studies have shown that the development of SCM represents an evolutionary step beyond logistics (Janvier &Assey, 2012). SCM extends logistical thinking by integrating the management of cooperation with that of material and information flows. Schaltegger and Bruitt (2014) conducted a systematic literature review of work on the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability in SCM. The researchers defined boundaries to delimit their research and establish a protocol for identifying, selecting, and reviewing these boundaries.

Schaltegger and Bruitt indicated the boundaries were (a) planning, denoted by identifying research and questions; (b) conducting the search for relevant analysis; and (c) reporting the formalized findings. Schaltegger and Bruitt found that SCM and the integration of sustainability into supply chains is an important and developing field. Integration is an important component of SSCM theory. Receiving valuable feedback from shareholders, staff members, subordinates, and customers are elements that Touboulic and Walker (2014) emphasized in the SSCM theory.

Sustainable integration. SCM operations link major business functions and business processes within and across companies into a cohesive and high-performing business model (Bhardwaj, 2016). SCM competency can create shareholder value by influencing customer satisfaction; it is also a major driver of organizations' financial performance. Ellinger et al. (2011) identified the potential relationship between SCM competency, customer satisfaction, and shareholder value improvements. While supply managers in various organizations have focused on continuous improvement in their supply base, many supply chain managers are focusing on meeting customer needs and demands (Simas, Lengler, & Antonio, 2013).

Hoejmose, Brammer, and Millington (2013) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the relationship between business strategy and socially responsible SCM with the objective of examining the direct relationship between the two factors. They collected data from 178 organizations in the United Kingdom, representing 340 buyer-supplier relationships. Minimizing the possibility of common method bias, Hoejmose et al. (2013)

conducted a two-part survey which could develop when the same researcher determines the dependent and independent variable.

Hoejmose et al. (2013) adopted five practices and adapted them to the context of socially responsible SCM. These five practices were (a) socially responsible supply requirements, (b) socially responsible supply rationale, (c) socially responsible problem process documentation, (d) socially responsible monitoring, and (e) socially responsible performance improvement. Hoejmose et al. found a direct relationship between business strategy and socially responsible SCM and asserted that the findings from their study confirmed their hypotheses and added validity to previous researchers' notions regarding the relationship between social responsibility and business strategy. Integrated in this new context are not only environmental and social criteria in the performance objectives of individual companies, but also for the management of the whole supply chain (Ketchen, Wowak, & Craighead, 2014; Nikabadi, 2014).

Environmental Evolution

De Marchi, Di Maria, and Micelli (2013) suggested that despite understanding how organizations benefit from reducing their environmental impact, some managers focus on the strategic implications of the activities of value chain partners. De Marchi et al. explained that green supply chain management (GSCM) addresses how managers integrate environmental thinking into supply chain management. Managers who engage in environmental thinking use strategies such as eco-design, waste management, and green operations to improve the environmental performance of their suppliers. Green marketing in SCM is an approach managers use to sell products and or services based on environmental benefits (Abdallah, Diabat, & Simchi, 2012; Gurtu, Searcy, & Jaber, 2015).

The strategy of differentiation involves providing a unique product that can be clearly distinguished from other existing products in the market (De Marchi et al., 2013). Managers developing a green market strategy as a means of achieving competitive advantage for an organization must ensure all subordinate managers understand the purpose of the green market strategy (Emmanuel-Ebikake, Roy & Shehab, 2014; Gurtu, Amulya, Searcy, & Cory, 2015). Effective green promotion is largely an outcome of selecting the right means, channels, and messages at the right time to reach the intended group of customers (Arseculeratne & Yazdanifard, 2014; Brockhaus, Fawett, Kersten, & Knemeyer, 2016).

Green marketing contributions are appropriate for managers who strive to compel their suppliers to make environmental improvements. Changes in supplier activities should advance knowledge and inspire technical cooperation in innovation (De Marchi et al., 2013). At the end of every strategy, defining the result should prove to be a competitive advantage for management. Competitive advantage can enable retail managers to remain ahead of competitors, and if retail managers manage to stay in front of their competitors, they can gain sustainable competitive advantage.

Organizational culture. Organizational culture is determined in part by factors such as leadership, decision making, organizational structure, and human resources

(Kumar & Nambirajan, 2013) .Managers can use their capabilities, knowledge, and experience to continue to innovate in the workplace (De Marchi et al., 2013). Managers who change their mentality exhibit different behaviors and demonstrate the process of knowledge; retail managers and their sales associates must understand their role in the society and act accordingly. Managers of retail organizations need to remain profitable, but profit is not the only or entire issue. Managers need to offer guidance within and beyond their organizations to allow innovations to reach society at large, even if managers at other organizations are unwilling to share information about their products, thereby withholding knowledge to retain profit (Bhardwaj, 2016).

Competitive advantage supports sustainability in retail, environmental protection, and other business operations. Managers need to innovate continuously to enable their organizations to achieve a competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is transitory at best because market conditions change rapidly and without notice. Decision makers who are not prepared to withstand an economic crisis fail to establish a well-planned strategy from the start (Bhardwaj, 2016). The process of preparing a good strategy should begin in difficult moments; good managers prepare good strategies and are ready to implement them before difficult times begin. In difficult times, appropriate solution may not emerge.

De Marchi et al. (2013) integrated the SSCM framework to analyze environmental upgrading trajectories in a multiple case study involving companies in the Italian home-furnishing industry. DeMarchi et al.'s findings indicated that organizations develop green strategies to reduce environmental impacts while realizing economic benefits and achieving a competitive edge. For managers in retail organizations to extract maximum profit from the sale of goods produced, they must ensure customers in the community receive excellent customer satisfaction. To ensure competitive advantage, managers must keep consumers satisfied (De Marchi et al., 2013).

Economic Sustainability

Economic benefits and competitiveness may appear internal to organizations seeking to improve their value chains with through bargaining power and value appropriation. Singh (2012) examined how management of business processes can help an organization achieve competitive advantage. Competitive advantage, as described by Singh, is a condition or position that enables improved operations and higher quality products and services. In managing competitive advantage, assigning specific roles by senior-level managers ensures the right personnel has the set of skills (training), experience, and resources for the role.

Sustainable supply chain reflects situational awareness of potential global risk (Closs, Speier, & Meacham, 2011). Managers must be innovative and support a broader sustainability perspective to ensure that consumers, the business, the supply chain community, and environmental relationships remain viable. Closs et al. (2011) used qualitative methods and a grounded theory approach to develop their framework for sustainability. Simon, DiSerio, Pires, and Matins (2015) collected data from global organizations in electronics, food, pharmaceutical, and retail markets that had publicly represented themselves as placing a high priority on sustainability. Simon et al.'s findings revealed that organizations in end-to-end value chains should adopt a much broader perspective of sustainability than is traditional accepted.

Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) focused on supply chains practices that imply a direct economic approach by the business. For their study population, they chose business organizations that invested in personnel time to increase the performance and capabilities of suppliers. Gimenez and Tachizawa conducted a meta-analysis of literature reviews on governance structures used to extend sustainability to suppliers. Case studies and surveys involving extension of sustainable practices to suppliers confirmed the hypotheses.

Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) concluded that managerial implication of supply chain practices requires both assessment of and collaboration with suppliers to ensure sustainable practices, asserting managers need to go one-step further and collaborate with their suppliers. Assessment is the first step, but collaborative practices are also necessary to improve sustainability. Gimenez and Tachizawa complimented the economics component of SSCM theory of meeting integrated sustainable strategies, objectives, and organizational goals through work teams and relationships with senior and subordinate managers and staff.

Economic and environmental impact. Various policies govern inbound and outbound logistics in sustainable SCM operations. Gupta and Palsule-Desai (2011) used four categories of the framework, summarizing existing literature reviews in their methodology on sustainable SCM. The four categories from existing literature reviews consisted of (a) strategic considerations, (b) decisions at functional interfaces, (c) regulations and government policies, and (d) industry practitioners making decisions related to sustainable SCM. Gupta and Palsule-Desai revealed the connection between decision makers and environmental performance is immediate. Because environmental considerations are associated with additional costs and constraints on production systems, some managers pursue new opportunities that could lead to better financial performance while minimizing the environmental impact of the organization. Unintended social, environmental, and economic consequences of rapid population growth, economic growth, consumption of natural resources, and commercial activities are as much a concern for businesses as they are for governments.

Implementation and organizational changes are key issues that warrant action by managers (Gupta & Palsule-Desai, 2011). Millar, Hind, and Magala (2012) opined implementation and organizational changes must include a change of thinking and a change of attitude that usually needs to start with leadership. Millar et al. used qualitative methods to examine the lived experience of participants as they internalized corporate environmentalism as part of individual and organizational identity. Data collection consisted of 15 semistructured interviews conducted with senior executives and board members of a large hospital in Australia.

While participants operate within and experience the same organizational context, the narratives and identities constructed can vary. Syntetos, Georgantzas, Boylan, and Dangerfield (2011) reported managers in retail organizations believe in achieving sustainability across their supply chains. Sustainability linked to internal organizational ethical policies, and managers' involvement is critical to implementing and monitoring the performance of sustainable businesses (Svensson & Wagner, 2012). Svensson and Wagner (2012) used an inductive approach to help them describe a corporate implementation and application of a sustainable business cycle. For data collection, Svensson and Wagner (2012) conducted unstructured interviews with managers, observed operations at the company site, and reviewed internal and external corporate documentation. Svensson and Wagner (2012) found senior and subordinate managers need profitable and sustainable green business in a competitive marketplace, and customers play an important role in demanding and seeking ethical and sustainable products. Managers who implement sustainable business cycles should make certain that their target market is aware of the benefits (Svensson & Wagner, 2012).

Seuring (2013) examined SCM from a different perspective sustainable products. Using empirical mixed methods, found a key concept to assess the environmental impact of products in life cycle assessment: links to SCM. Connected to sustainability is SCM because the concept of sustainability extends to the operational drivers of profitability and their relationship to people and the environment. The objective of a supply chain is to include value in the products and services delivered to customers (de Abreu & Chicarelli Alcântara, 2015; Winter & Knemeyer, 2013). Business processes are the activities that produce a specific output of value to the customer(s). Supply chains are not linear chains, but rather complex relationship networks.

Winter and Knemeyer (2013) used a six-step classification process in their qualitative study to explore the integration of sustainability and SCM. Winter and Knemeyer (2013) found existing literature included individual sustainability and supply dimensions rather than a more integrated approach. The objective of integrating sustainability strategies is to achieve effective and efficient flows of products, supplies, services, and information to provide maximum value to customers. Integrating sustainability strategies in retail operations reduces the probability and impact of adverse occurrences.

Risk management. In retail operations, risk represents threats to stakeholders' or owners' value in the business. Stakeholders include customers, stockholders, distributors, suppliers, creditors, and competitors (Sharma, Bhat, & Routroy, 2014). Risk management is a process of minimizing the potential damage to available resources by mitigating the consequences (Bello & Bovell, 2012; Croitoru, 2014). Risk management processes include identifying risks and their sources, evaluating risks, selecting and implementing risk management strategies. In addition, risk management includes reducing the probabilities of adverse occurrences and developing risk mitigation strategies such as reducing the impact of adverse occurrences (Bharathy & McShane, 2014).

The unpredictability of the retail business environment, customers' variable demands, actions by competitors, and continuous improvement initiatives means the supply chain never reaches a steady state (Colicchia & Strozzi, 2012; Nikabadi, 2014). A systematic review of literature revealed the supply chain never has a steady state. The unpredictability of future events underscores the importance of a resilient supply chain are a strategy and a structure aligned with the actual business context.

Quabouch and Pache (2014) indicated risk management balances rapidly changing and evolving challenges, including those involved in implementing risk management in business organizations. Advances in technology allow for new and more powerful ways to model risk, while new sources of uncertainty continue to emerge. Elahi (2013) found risk management reflects the future direction of SCM. The commercial risk management process encompasses a range of interrelated issues that can be difficult to understand in abstract terms. Appropriate risk management strategy aligns with the organization and current state of the economy.

Developing risk management capabilities can be challenging (Elahi, 2013). Risk management requires coordination of integrated risk strategies and support from senior level management. Implementing risk management in a business organization to gain and maintain a competitive advantage is a goal of many senior-level management teams.

Specialized business organizations can determine the success or failure of the pursuit of competitive advantages. In examining risk management from holistic systems, Ahmed, Fekete, and Eva (2015) identified important strategic changes, outlining future requirements, and researched opportunities in risk management operations. Managing risk in the environment is becoming increasingly challenging because of uncertainties in supply and demand, global outsourcing, and short product life cycles. Ahmed et al. conducted a systematic literature review to identify data sources, screen the data, conduct data analysis, and identify research gaps. Ahmed et al. found risk patterns that were less likely in a conventional literature study. Gaps indicated more emphasis on efficient data analysis because weak analysis makes deciphering future challenges more difficult.

In comparing assessments of managing risk, Giannakis and Louis (2011) developed a framework for of a multi-agent decision support system to minimize disruptions and mitigate risks in manufacturing supply chains. Multi-agent modeling is an alternate decision-making tool for collaboration in supply chains. Giannakis and Louis's literature review included studies that investigated supply chain risk phenomena as well as models for the analysis and mitigation of various supply chain risks. Multi-agent supply chain risk management models have advantages over conventional information and communication technology tools. For example, inter-organizational information and communication technology tools support the management of supply chain activities to communicate and share information quickly and reliably. Sharing knowledge supports information symmetries across the supply chain, enabling identification of events that could disrupt supply chain processes (Giannakis & Louis, 2011).

Supply chain risk management is critical in retail operations; therefore, managers must implement measures in daily operations to mitigate risks and reduce the impact of risks, as recommended in SSCM theory. While supply chain risk management reduces the likelihood of adverse occurrences through improved processes and buffer strategies, some managers still need to take action against unforeseen events because risks remain constant (Jansen, de Kok, & Fransoo, 2013). Confirmed by previous studies, sourcing strategy remains important for managing supply risk, particularly in single sourcing strategies where the risk of supply failure is greater (Jansen et al., 2013).

In SCM operations, any single point of failure will lead to disruptions in the supply chain network, leading to different types of risk in supply chain operations. Lee, Yeung, and Hong (2012) explored generic frameworks to assess and simulate outsourcing risks in supply chain operations. Qualitative risk assessment allows risk managers to visualize imminent risks using a risk map. Organizational managers could manage their risk by adopting a systematic method to identify the potential risk before outsourcing.

SCM is the key to success in contemporary competitive global environments, regardless of the organization (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012). Cost pressure demands organizations implement competitive strategies, including extended supply chain networking, facilitated through globalization and outsourcing (Punniyamoorthy, Thamaraiselvan, & Manikandan, 2011). Punniyamoorthy et al. (2011) used a systematic approach to develop and validate mechanisms for assessing the overall risk of supply chains. Punniyamoorthy et al. began by identifying potential risk sources that affect performance and concluded diversity and having various supply chain risk constructs were important countermeasure strategies.

Spiegler, Naim, and Wikner (2012) asserted potential risks can come from any possibility of a mismatch between supply and demand, along with serving customers inefficiently. From a different point of view, Sodhi, Son, and Tang (2012) reviewed the literature and formed their perceptions about supply chain risk management research

(SCRM). Sodhi et al. noted the lack of appropriate research on supply chain risk incidents and a shortage of empirical research on supply chain risk management and vulnerability. Organizations with inferior supply chain performance do not meet customer requirements, resulting from lack of product availability and delayed delivery common supply chain risk.

Wagner and Neshat (2012) administered a large-scale supply chain survey to managers of various organizations in Germany. Respondents provided information about their organization and its supply chain performance, supply chain characteristics, supply chain risk planning, and risk management activities. For organizations to maintain a competitive advantage through their supply chains, leaders must pay attention to outsourcing, supplier collaborating, inventory reduction, globalization of their production, and sourcing networks (Wagner & Neshat, 2012). Supply chain managers need to manage supply chain risk and vulnerability to avoid costly disruptions and the negative consequences of failure for their organization.

Supply chain risk management is one of the fastest growing areas in supply and logistics research (Durowoju, Chan, & Wang, 2012; Wieland & Wallenburg, 2012). While anecdotal evidence points to some supply chain risk managers allowing supply chains to react more quickly and to withstand adverse events, little empirical research exists that reveals the fundamental mechanism. Wieland and Wallenburg (2012) conducted a mixed methods study to count, measure, and analyze observations, as well as to identify and compare qualities of empirical evidence. Wieland and Wallenburg (2012) administered surveys to capture quantitative data, supplemented by case studies to collect additional qualitative data (Wieland & Wallenburg, 2012) and concluded supply chain risk management could reduce vulnerabilities both reactively and proactively. Reactive supply chain risk management involves monitoring changes in the supply chain, customer needs, technology, partner strategies, and competitors.

Being agile has a strong positive effect on the customer value in the supply chain; however, value can be mediated by the impact on business performance (Durowoju et al., 2012). Wieland and Wallenburg (2012) revealed a positive effect of agility in the case of high customer-side risks. To fill gaps in risk management operations, supply chain risk management literature needs to include risks relating to the supply side, the demand side, and the infrastructure of a supply chain; in addition, managers need to base risk on the organization's probabilities and impacts (Wieland & Wallenburg, 2012).

Challenges and advantages. In retail operations and global marketplaces, sustaining a competitive position is of paramount concern (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012). Technological innovations and economic uncertainties compound the challenges of competition (Liu, Jasimuddin, & Faulkner, 2014; Shaikh, Al-Maymouri, Al-Hamed, & Dardad, 2014). An organization is profitable when the value obtained is higher than the costs incurred. Gherasim (2013) illustrated (a) the value chain of a company, (b) the role of technology development, (c) the cost advantage, and (d) the technology and competition advantage, concluding that technological change is an essential driving force of competition. Technologies that contributed most to the overall strategy of the organization, balanced against the probability of success in their development.

Resource-advantage theory is an effective and efficient utilization of organizational resources that managers could use to gain and maintain a competitive advantage (Srivastava, Franklin, & Martinette, 2013). To achieve a competitive advantage, organizations need to (a) continuously identify and differentiate product strategies, (b) build core competencies, (c) acquire unique technologies, and (d) accumulate intellectual property (Srivastava et al., 2013). Srivastava et al. (2013) conducted a mixed methods study to determine how the leadership of an organization, its human capital management, organizational culture, design, and systems can collectively merge to form a dynamic and responsive organization. Srivastava et al. concluded high-tech organizations typically adopt a more agile and customer-centric approach to identifying new markets and future products than other types of organizations.

In adopting a more agile and customer-centric approach, effective sustainable manufacturing practice has become a potentially valuable way of securing a competitive advantage and improving organizational performance (Russell & Millar, 2014). Russell and Millar (2014) administered surveys as part of their conceptual research model relative to the adoption of sustainable manufacturing practices and business performance, and the adoption of sustainable manufacturing practices associated with competitive advantage. Russell and Millar (2014) found a significant negative relationship exists between sustainability practices and business performance, and no significant relationship exist between sustainability practices and competitive advantage.

Adopting sustainable manufacturing practices might not lead to better business performance and improved competitiveness. In studying improved competitiveness, Gilaninia, Chirani, Ramezani, and Mousavian (2011) sought to understand of sustainable competitive advantages. Gilaninia et al. hypothesized about five dimensions of sustainable supply chain management practices for competitive advantages: (a) strategic supplier partnership, (b) customer relationship, (c) level of information sharing, (d) quality of information sharing, and (e) internal lean practices. Supply chains consist of activities related to circulation and exchange of goods from raw materials and product delivery. Gilaninia et al. used descriptive statistics and tested their hypotheses on data relating to leadership (senior-level management), mid-lower level managers, and employees of those organizations. Results indicated that managers could set up instruction periods to promote process and product technological systems. Gilaninia et al. found some retail managers need to communicate with business partners to share knowledge of essential business processes and to ensure the information shared is accurate and reliable. This analysis relates to the social, environmental, and economics in SSCM theory and managers achieving organizational goals by integrated strategies through work teams and relationships with business partners and staff (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012).

Innovational strategies. Oke, Prajogo, and Jayaram (2013) focused on supply chain partners, including suppliers and customers, in the supply chain of an organization. Some supply chain managers innovate in terms of the extent to which their partner can produce new ideas and innovations (Chakravarty, 2013; Oke et al., 2013). Innovation is a key source of competitive advantage.

Product innovation strategy and product innovation performance are separate constructs. Product innovation strategy is what managers do in their organizations to obtain novel products, as well as the actions and activities involved in improving innovation performance (Fu, Patrick, Bosak, Morris, & O'Regan, 2013; Storer, Hyland, Ferrer, Santa, & Griffiths, 2014). Theoretical arguments justify the key relationship that ties supply chain partner innovativeness to the focus of organizational innovative strategy. The internal climate for innovation should align with efforts toward external agents' key suppliers for transforming ideas into innovations to maintain a competitive advantage.

Transition

Section 1 contained the foundation of the study, background of the problem, research question, conceptual framework, significance of the study, and a comprehensive literature review. Included in Section 1 were the three goals of sustainable supply chain management: social, environmental, and economic competitive advantage. The literature indicated that some managers use innovational strategies to encourage supply chain associates to produce new ideas and innovations. Section 2 introduces the research project, the purpose of the study, role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, ethical research, instruments, reliability, and validity.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that managers of retail organizations use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. The target population consisted of managers employed at retail distribution organizations in the southeastern United States who have implemented procedures enabling them to sustain a competitive advantage.

Role of the Researcher

My role was to collect and analyze data and to present the findings in an unbiased and ethical manner. I collected data in a trustworthy manner that mitigated the likelihood of bias (Chenail, 2011; Smit, 2012). I am familiar with the topic of this study because during my tenure in the U.S. Army, my specialization was supply and logistics operations.

I adhered to the protocols for protecting human subjects of research by providing information about the study before requesting potential participants' consent to participate, allowing voluntarily participation, and allowing participants to decline to participate (see Bird, 2010; Ross et al., 2010). To mitigate bias, I identified any biases I may have had and engaged in the process of exposing and eliminating biases (Wilson & Washington, 2007). The vantage point of others can be difficult to comprehend (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008). As Fields and Kafai (2009) described, when researchers identify their personal viewpoint and accept their personal bias, they become better prepared to understand others' viewpoints. I conducted interviews in a way that preserved the ethical standards of the Belmont Report (Bird, 2010; Ross et al., 2010; Turner, 2010). The Belmont Report addresses issues of health and safety (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodyakov, 2015) and represents the first guidelines on ethical research (Lange, Rogers, & Dodds, 2013) to protect vulnerable and disadvantaged human research participants (Bromley et al., 2015; Lange et al., 2013). My role in this research study was to ensure that I had proper interviewing skills by studying and applying interview techniques. Applying effective interview techniques is important because the quality of the interview coincided with the quality of data collected through the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Participants

I conducted research among participants employed by a mid-size retail organization in the southeastern United States. Eligibility criteria for participation included having a minimum of 2 years of managerial experience in retail operations, and being a manager with experience implementing successful strategies to motivate sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. After obtaining permission from selected retail distribution managers to gain access to participants, I solicited interest in the study. Eligible retail distribution managers received an invitation to participate via e-mail. Strategies for establishing a cordial relationship with potential participants began by my (a) being courteous, (b) applying effective listening skills, (c) taking an interest in their organization, and (d) being honest (Denzin, 2012; Posner, 2016).

Research Method and Design

When selecting a research method, the investigator should identify the most effective method for achieving the goals of the study and answering each question (Hayes, Bonner, & Douglas, 2013). I chose the research method and design for this study with care after the problem statement took shape. My justification for selecting a qualitative method and a case study design flowed from the research question and conceptual framework. Qualitative research allows for the exploration and understanding of individuals' intentions in an emergent study. In this study, the research methods and design informed the conclusion I drew from analysis and supported the recommendations I made (see Rugg & Petre, 2007).

Research Method

Qualitative research is well suited to an examination of the dynamics relating to strategies in business organizations (Coenen, Stamn, Stucki, & Cieza, 2012). I chose the qualitative method for this study to explore and understand the sustainability strategies that contribute to retail distribution managers in the southeastern United States being able to maintain a competitive advantage. Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) described the qualitative study as one of the best designs for business applications. Providing insight into what the person experiences is the essence of qualitative methods (Kramer-Kile, 2012). The qualitative method was appropriate for this study because my intent was to explore the business process of the sustainability strategies some managers used to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage.

I did not use the quantitative method because I did not seek to quantify or describe with numerical values the population of interest (Walsh, 2015). Mixed methods studies combine both qualitative and quantitative methods and are appropriate when the researcher seeks to triangulate data, generate hypotheses, or expand on research tools (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The mixed method approach was not appropriate for this study because I did not wish to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Hoare & Hoe, 2013).

Research Design

I chose a case study design for this study. The research questions, once developed, pointed to the need for a case study to explore the sustainability strategies retail managers had used effectively (Bentahar & Cameron, 2015). Yin (2014) confirmed that if the research question focuses on *what*, then all types of qualitative research are appropriate, and case studies are especially pertinent when the researcher seeks to answer questions of *how* or *why*. Case study design was appropriate for this study because my intent was to understand the strategies some managers had used successfully to maintain competitive advantage (see Cronin, 2014).

Phenomenological designs are appropriate when the intent is to inquire into human experiences with a specific phenomenon (Cronin, 2014; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Since my intent was to understand strategies involved in maintaining a competitive advantage, a phenomenological design was not an appropriate design option for this study (Annansingh & Howell 2016). I determined that I had reached data saturation when no new information resulted from interviews, no new coding occurred, no new themes were apparent, and replication of the results was possible (Tiragari, 2012).

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was managers employed by a mid-sized retail organization in the southeastern United States. An exploratory single case study is an appropriate design if participants are representatives in the same setting (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2014). Sample sizes for qualitative explorations are smaller than in quantitative studies (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014; Robinson, 2014). Furthermore, data for a case study may come from various sources, including documents, interviews, direct observation, and participant observations, which obviates the need for a large sample (Yin, 2014).

In this study, I assembled a participant group using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was more appropriate than random sampling because I sought to engage managers employed in retail distribution centers (Marshall et al. 2013; Yarmohammadian, Atighechian, Shams, & Haghshenas, 2011). The intent was to select three to five participants who met the criteria using purposive nonrandom sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015). Interviews conducted with this sample group until data saturation was achieved and no new information was revealed (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Participants were required to have worked in or interacted with a leadership (managerial) position for at least 2 years and to have been over 18 years of age to be eligible to participate.

Ethical Research

Upon receiving IRB approval (number, 10-04-16-0424693), I proceeded with the data collection. Marshall and Rossman (2011) explained that research involves more than procedural matters. I informed potential participants that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the interview process. I did not offer any incentive for participation in the study to avoid perceptions of coercion. Participants indicated their willingness to participate in this study before interviews began (see Appendix A). I ensured the confidentiality of participants in keeping with the fundamentals of ethical research (Baker, 2012; Tamariz, Palacio, Robert, & Marcus, 2013).

My intent was to ensure I maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants in all aspects of the interview by assigning them a numerical code. All data entered into a password-protected computer database by the numerical code. All documents and data files related to the research is secured in a locked cabinet for 5 years to protect participant's confidentiality. After the 5 years, I will destroy all hard copies of consent forms and related data, and erase all electronic data (Yun, Han, & Lee, 2013).

Data Collection Instruments

Yin (2014) explained that qualitative case study researchers often use interviews to collect data. To understand the phenomenon of what sustainability strategies retail managers use to maintain competitive advantages, I conducted informal semistructured interviews in which I posed open-ended questions (see Appendix B) to interview participants (Robinson, 2014). When individual interviews are the principal source of data, the researcher is typically the primary instrument used to collect, process, and interpret the data (Blair & Conrad, 2011).

Open-ended questions posed to capture managers' views and personal beliefs regarding effective leadership characteristics and strategies applied to manage retail operations (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Wilton, Paez, and Scott (2011) conducted a similar study involving open-ended questions posed in interviews through electronic media to understand the complexities of a given phenomenon. Because I was the primary data collection instrument, I used a semistructured interview instrument. Each interview consisted of six open-ended interview questions covering participants' strategies to maintain competitive advantage (Robinson, 2014).

Qu and Dumay (2011) suggested that semistructured interviews are the most common instrument in qualitative research; the instrument is a series of prepared questions posed in pursuit of common themes. To ensure reliability and validity, I validated the questions with a panel of experts. I used member checking to follow up on interviews with participants and share my interpretation of their comments; this exchange confirmed my interpretations. I used member checking throughout the interview process to identify when no new information resulted from interviews, no new coding occurred, and no new themes were apparent.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative research emphasizes assumptions and the use of interpretive theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems related to the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Turner, 2010). The qualitative research method involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a phenomenon of interest (Stake, 2010). I collected data from on-site interviews with open-ended questions. Semistructured interviews permit researchers to identify common themes from the participants (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

When conducting interviews, my intent was to provide participants with the opportunity to respond with their views of sustainable strategies used most often to motivate sales personnel to maintain a competitive advantage (Sigalas et al., 2013). Conducting the interviews on-site allows participants to engage in the interviews at their convenience and in the comfort of a familiar setting. The disadvantage of conducting on-site interviews includes the possibility that participants will not provide honest assessments or be distracted or too busy to fully engage in the interview (Wilton et al., 2011). I used direct observation, archival analysis of company documents, and field notes to interpret what the participant shared. I used 3X5 index cards as a form of member checking to assist with understanding interviewees' meaning, ensuring all responses from participants were accurate. Scheduling interviews in a comfortable setting allows for maximum benefit of reliability and validity (Hirdes et al., 2013). My intent was to interview participants in a comfortable and nonthreatening environment, enabling participants to be open and honest about their experience with strategies to maintain a competitive advantage (Sigalas et al., 2013). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Data Organization Technique

Gibson, Benson, and Brand (2013) suggested assigning generic codes to participants is best to achieve confidentiality and anonymity of each participant. I used generic codes to mask participants' identities. Upon completion of the interviews, I spoke with the participants to obtain any additional information they wished to provide. I re-interviewed participants, asked questions for clarity, and shared my interpretation of their comments to confirm my interpretation. Data organization included the creation of a database to store research logs, journals, personnel information, and other archival data (Roulston, 2011). An Excel spreadsheet and NVivo 11 software facilitated content analysis and to determine specific themes and patterns from the interviews (Gibson et al., 2013).

During the study, I stored confidential electronic data on a password-protected cabinet and confidential physical data in a locked cabinet to ensure participants' protection, as recommended by Gibson et al. (2013). These data will remain stored securely for 5 years, after which the paper notes and the computer flash drive are destroyed.

Data Analysis

As described by C. V. Wilson (2012), qualitative researchers can ask open-ended questions to collect data and explore meanings in the study. I established an interview protocol and performed methodological triangulation by asking each participant the same interview questions (see Appendix B). The most important step in qualitative research is the process of data analysis (Chang & Jacobs, 2012; Suri, 2011). In conducting data analysis, I sought to uncover themes that answered the central research question. Data analysis consisted of coding, reviewing, defining, and combining common statements, thereby identifying emergent themes that supported subsequent conclusions (Wilton et al. 2011).

Data coding consisted of identifying keywords based on like terms that emerged from the field notes and follow-up member checking (Wilton et al., 2011). I entered these keywords and phrases into the Excel spreadsheet and NVivo 10 software, where I organized and prioritized them based on the number of times mentioned in participants' responses to questions. Keeping the data in an Excel database and using NVivo 11 software assisted me with identifying emergent patterns and themes revealed from the responses (Wilton et al., 2011). The descriptive answers derived from the interview questions represented the basis for the detailed and accurate field notes. I used a method of constant comparison between interviews and field notes to identify themes regarding strategies managers used to motivate their employees in retail operations. Chang and Jacobs (2012) used a coding process to identify themes from their study (Harland, 2014).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Qualitative reliability and validity are indicators of the accuracy of data in a study (Wilton et al., 2011). Hirdes et al. (2013) asserted factors that undermine the quality of data in real-world situations include poor training, systematic biases in reporting financial incentives, and avoidance of negative consequences of unfavorable findings. One way to demonstrate reliability is to document research procedures during the process in a research journal (Grossoehme, 2014).

To ensure reliability and dependability, I documented the processes of this study through the stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation such as interview notes, follow-up member checking, and field notes. Interpreting what participants shared and sharing the interpretation with the participants for validation (using 3X5 cards) were examples of dependability and member checking used (Wilton et al., 2011). Demonstrating reliability and validity confirms that a study has suitable rigor (Ali & Yusof, 2011). I withheld my personal perspectives during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I used member checking to examine the reliability of rebuilding my participants' emic perception (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

The study used reliable and previously validated instruments, such as Microsoft Excel and NVivo 11 software. Reliability and validity in this qualitative case study linked to my ability to ensure the data interpretations, data analysis, and the conclusions are a direct reflection of the reality (Posner, 2016). Guo, Ma Pei, and Su Xio (2013) illustrated that the only way to assess the value of a qualitative study is by reliability.

I took notes during interviews and transcribed each interview to indicate pauses and overlaps in audio data. I used audio-recorded data and took notes, making sure that I fully understood what interviewees had said. I asked questions to ensure my notes were accurate and aligned with interviewees' responses. To confirm my notes were accurate and of high quality, I had an outside accredited transcribe the audio recordings. Camfield and Palmer-Jones (2013) posited qualitative data relates to the time and skills required to create research materials of sufficient quality (Elo et al., 2014).

Validity

Gall et al. (2007) explained that validity in research depends on the trustworthiness and experience of the researcher. Validity relates to the accuracy of the findings; therefore, to achieve internal validity, an investigator should review data similarities among participants (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). When a study has high validity, the probability of rival explanations decreases (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data triangulation improves the validity of a case study (Yin, 2013).

I followed a case study design and collected data from multiple sources; triangulation of data was a principle strategy supporting the principles of validity (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I used purposeful selection of participants to ensure the probabilities of themes were equally distributed. Following the interview protocol ensured a nearly identical scripted interview process and questions to enhance the validity of the data

(Wilton et al., 2011). I used member checking to check for accuracy and to ensure that I captured the meaning of what the participants had said. Member checking is the most reliable way to confirm the credibility of the study (Loiselle, Profetto-McGrath, Polit, & Beck, 2010). To confirm creditability as a maximum benefit for reliability and validity, I used 3X5 cards and periodically confirmed throughout the initial interview with each participant that I had correctly understood what he or she had shared and then shared my interpretations with the participants for validation.

Transferability refers to the extent in which researchers can apply or transfer the findings of one study to other settings or groups (Ekekewe, 2013). Transferability of the findings in this research will be determined by readers and future researchers. As Marshall and Rossman (2016) explained, a set of findings applies to another context if another researcher determines the findings of this study are applicable elsewhere. Confirmability is vital to future research; therefore, I thoroughly described the research concept, the processes I followed, and the assumptions that were central to the research (Roulston, 2011).

I provided in-depth descriptions of the participants' responses about their professional experiences in sustainability strategies. Torrance (2012) found that data triangulation requires two or more data sources to give a fuller informative picture of what is going on; data collected from multiple sources is more valid than data from only a single source. I collected data from four participants who answered the same interview questions. The archival documentation they provided further enhanced the data triangulation process in this study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Data saturation may be associated when a further collection of evidence provides no new information in a qualitative research synthesis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To ensure data saturation and member checking in this study, I reviewed and interpreted the interview using 3X5 cards, asked questions for clarification of what was stated, and documented each question and a succinct synthesis of each response.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of conducting this qualitative case study was to explore the characteristics and leadership strategies of retail managers by understanding the successful strategies they had implemented to maintain a competitive advantage in their retail markets. Participants consisted of retail managers from the southeastern region of the United States. The findings of the study could influence social change by increasing organizational leaders' knowledge of the characteristics of sustainability strategies used successfully by other retail managers. Data collected from on-site interviews, during which open-ended questions were posed, and from a review of archival documentation provided by the participants.

Purposive non-random sampling allowed me to establish a sample group knowledgeable of and experienced with retail management and the use of strategies to motivate sales teams to maintain competitive advantage. All participants signed and submitted informed consent to participate in the study. Numerical codes assigned to participants protected their identity and the confidentiality of their responses. Data collected via on-site semistructured interviews. Data were organized using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using NVivo 11 software to identify themes. I will maintain the data from the study and will keep the findings in a locked safe for 5 years.

Section 3 includes the results of the study; in that section, I identify the common themes of characteristics of retail managers' strategies for competitive sustainability. Also included are my interpretation of the results and alignment with the conceptual framework, research question, and purpose of the study. Also included are an explanation of the application of the study to professional practice and implications for social change, as well as recommendations for further research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies that retail managers in the southeastern United States use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against their rivals. I conducted semistructured interviews with retail managers in a midsized retail organization to collect data on the strategies they used to motivate sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. I conducted interviews in one of the private conference rooms available in the organization, where the participants would be relaxed and comfortable. The participants answered six open-ended questions as part of their interviews (see Appendix B).

After making audio recordings during the interviews, transcribing them, and reviewing organizational documents, I imported the data into NVivo Version 11 software for coding. Upon analyzing the data, I identified four main themes: (a) essential strategies, (b) ethical factors, (c) risk factors, and (d) the value of sustainable strategy regarding stakeholders, suppliers, and customers. Within these themes, I outlined the strategies used by retail managers to motivate their sales associates to maintain competitive advantage against rivals in the retail industry.

Presentation of the Findings

I used semistructured interviews to gain an understanding of the strategies retail managers use to remain competitive in the retail industry, and to answer the following research question: What strategies do retail organization managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage? In addition to conducting semistructured interviews, I reviewed the standard operating procedures of the organization, the employee handbook provided to all employees of the organization, and meeting notes. I conducted the four face-to-face semistructured interviews when participants were accessible.

During the interviews, I ensured the setting was quiet and private, thereby limiting distractions. Each interview completed in less than 60 minutes. After all the interviews were completed, transcribed of audio recordings and organizational documents were reviewed, I imported the data into NVivo 11 software for coding. After collecting data, analyzing interviews, and reviewing organizational documents (the standard operating procedures, employee handbook, and notes from previous meetings), eight themes emerged. I grouped the themes into four (emergent) main themes.

Essential strategies, ethical factors, risk factors, and value of sustainable strategies were the four emergent themes. The findings for each theme supported the components of SSCM theory: (a) sustainability as part of an integrated strategy, (b) organizational culture involving value and ethics, and (c) risk management (Touboulic & Walker, 2014). SSCM theory applies to management practices when multiple strategies and factors work together to achieve the goal of the organization to maintain a competitive advantage (Iyer et al., 2014; Mellat-Parast, 2013).

For this doctoral study, I reviewed the SSCM conceptual framework and found a connection with the findings that provided a means for understanding the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of strategies, barriers, and other critical factors that influence how retail managers maintain a competitive advantage in retail operations. Iyer et al. (2014) revealed that despite the strategic importance of partnerships, they sometimes fail and the costs of coordination increase, making market exchanges attractive. A case study approach served as an effective way to explore the phenomenon of competitive strategy in a real-life setting (see Cronin, 2014). Data sources for this study summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of References from Each Source

	Participants	Employee Handbook	Standard Operating Procedure	Meeting Notes
Theme 1	P1, P2, P3, P4	6	1	1
Theme 2	P1, P2, P3, P4	2	1	0
Theme 3	P1, P2, P3, P4	0	1	0
Theme 4	P1, P2, P3, P4	4	0	1

Theme 1: Essential Strategies

Theme 1 revealed that retail managers should know the essential strategies and the capabilities of their sales associates to ensure their organizations remain competitive against rivals; this theme related to Interview Questions 1 and 5. Sustainable strategies represent one of the most important success factors for achieving sustainable development in organizations (Cervera & Flores, 2012). Participant P1 said, “It is vital to know our sales associates and their capabilities, such as strengths and weaknesses.”

Knowing sales associates' capabilities allows managers to assign tasks or areas of responsibilities to those associates most competent to achieve success. As P1 noted, "Knowing the strength and weakness of each employee would prevent unnecessary circumstances, such as not meeting customer needs." P1 continued, "If customers are not legitimately satisfied, this decreases sales and profits," denoting that dissatisfied customers are bad for business. An increase in the number of dissatisfied customers could translate to a decrease in sales and profits, which could trigger staffing cutbacks.

Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) indicated that in retail operations and other global marketplaces, sustaining a competitive position is a paramount concern. P2 commented, "I spend a plethora amount of time training new sales associates who never worked in retail operations." P4 revealed, "At times, new sales associates are easier to train than the ones claiming they know standard retail operations." P3 explained that when new sales associates (experienced and non-experienced) are assigned to the section, "The new sales associates are briefed on the mission and goals of the organization." In addition, P3 continued to explain that the standard operating procedure of the organization and employee handbooks are given to new sales associates by their managers, and managers encourage employees to read them and become familiar with policies and procedures of the organization.

The employee handbook includes a section that indicates retail managers will brief new sales associates on their duties and responsibilities upon assignment to the manager's section. P3 said, "It is a huge relief when a sales associate has experience and is mature enough to take the lead on upcoming events such as holiday sales and other new products." P4 revealed that having new experienced sales associates "allows for time [for me] to assist those sales associates lacking the knowledge they need to meet daily agendas of the organization." P4 said, "Some sales associates are not lazy; however, they require direct supervision."

Providing good compensation and benefits, opportunities for rewards (e.g., employee of the month/year) and advancement, additional training and development, and supervisor support are primary strategies to increase motivation necessary to maintain competitive advantage (Van Dyk & Coetzee, 2012). According to SSCM theory, organizational culture involves establishing values and ethics as strategies retail managers can use to motivate employees to maintain the competitive advantage of the retail organization; in addition, having an adequate budget to compensate sales associates is important for keeping sales associates motivated (Carter & Rogers, 2008). Retail managers who establish reward and recognition strategies to acknowledge sales associates for their work can realize an increase of profitability (Hoejmose et al., 2013). P2 stated that training and development programs for sales associates are "normally scheduled approximately 90 days in advance during their monthly staff meetings."

P4 emphasized that scheduled training and development programs implemented by senior staff members "motivate and give our cashiers and sales associates opportunities to enhance their skills and perform at the highest level in retail operations." P2 revealed, "Anybody can meet a standard; however, it takes someone who is motivated, dedicated, and eager to exceed the standard by meeting their section and organization's goals." P3 said, "Senior managers within the organization offer additional opportunities for promotion to lower level management teams and senior sales associate positions." The findings of this study are consistent with those of Caniato et al. (2013) and Zu and Hale (2012), who reported that management improvement programs enhance performance and have a positive social impact on personnel in organizations.

SSCM theory holds that essential sustainability strategies are crucial for influencing workers to establish and maintain situational awareness of organizational goals and their roles in achieving them. P1 said, "Seeing the end results is an important factor of reaching and exceeding organizational goals." P1 noted another key factor for motivating employees: "Making them feel part of the team." Findings related to this main theme underscored the importance of establishing the strategic and economic goals of the organization as the foundation on which retail managers can develop their strategies to motivate sales associates to gain and maintain a competitive advantage (Abdallah et al., 2014).

Responses to Interview Questions 1 and 5 revealed strategies that managers believed were effective in motivating sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against rivals. Hewitt (2012) indicated that every employee should feel as if he or she is a natural fit for the organization. I also asked study participants to discuss strategies they had used and subsequently perceived were ineffective. P1 said that "giving too much latitude" to sales associates is not an effective strategy.

From P2’s perspective, “managing task-oriented people as well, is not effective.” I asked P2 to define the notion of task-oriented employees. As P2 explained, “Task-oriented employees are employees that are comfortable with doing a specific job.” P2 continued, “For example, a sales associate that stocks shelves with merchandise may feel uncomfortable working the cash register.” Even though an employee might feel ill at ease with a task, both duties are listed in the employee handbook as part of the job description for a sales associate.

Over-communicating is another ineffective strategy, as reported by P3. P3 said, “Over-communicating does not always help with accomplishing a task.” As P3 explained, “If something is communicated to a sales associate that they are not receptive of, then communication is ineffective regardless of the number of times a manager communicates it.” James and Mathew (2012) remarked that effective communication with leaders promotes organizational commitment. P4 did not mention any strategies as being ineffective; however, when a strategy is found to not work, that strategy is not used again.

I asked the participants about barriers they encountered with their sales associates. The participants revealed their own perceptions of obstacles to motivating sales associates to maintain competitive advantage over rival retail organizations. P1 said the organization is a “quasi-government organization and the pay scale is not as high as in the private sector.” P1 explained the structure of the organization results in a financial barrier because “the organization cannot offer the salaries that the private sector offers.”

P2 revealed, “Compensation, especially in the past 5 years, was not as much as before and compensation is a significant barrier.” P2 further claimed, “Pay structure is difficult to address,” and that “to get people on the open market with the same skills is difficult because their organization compensation is less than what other organizations pay.” However, P4 mentioned that the benefits package offered by the organization “compensates for the compensation challenges.”

The benefits package mentioned in the employee handbook consists of on-site gratuitous awards such as gift cards and bonuses for superior performance, leading to an increase in profits for the organization. The employee of the month receives a $100.00 bonus in pay for the month selected and employee of the year receives a $1,200.00 bonus in pay and a designated parking space for the year selected. In addition, training opportunities for advancement in the organization is a benefit employees appreciate.

P3 offered a different insight on the matter of compensation by pointing to a chapter in the employee handbook and noting, “General managers in the organization conduct annual salary reviews to determine if the pay structures are competitive in the market.” P3 did not know enough about these salary reviews to go into further detail about financial barriers in the organization. Internal benefits such as gratuitous awards, employee of the month, and employee of the year are the benefits employee could receive for superior work performance. One of the goals in the organization is customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction could generate an increase in profits, and provides good relations to the community by providing outstanding service.

I asked questions to gain insight into any critical factors that managers encountered in supervising sales associates. The participants' comments revealed their individual perceptions of the critical factors involved in motivating their sales associates. The participants discussed the value of sales associates and the importance of sales associates to the organization. P1 revealed it was important for the organization to "retain motivated and dedicated sale associates with a significant skill set." P2 stated, "An employee's value to the organization is a key factor because there are certain skills that are based on experience that are difficult to replace." Chang (2010) indicated that turnover among employees with specialized expertise creates productivity problems for organizations.

P3 remarked, "There are not too many people that know how to perform a specific job." In other words, if a sales associate leaves the organization, his or her absence creates productivity challenges in the service and sales department. From a different perspective, P1 mentioned, "Identifying sales associates with an exceptional skill is an essential element used in working in retail organizations, particularly in the service and sales department." P2 and P4 did not elaborate on their opinions; however, P2 indicated that giving an employee just enough space to be creative, manage his or her tasks, and take ownership of his or her assigned work is a critical strategy.

From barriers to critical factors, I asked the respondents their views on compensation and benefits. Van Dyk and Coetzee (2012) emphasized that compensation is essential for opportunities for training, employee development, and work-life balance, which is a retention strategy for motivating sales associates. P3 profiled the organization as a “midsized organization and the pay scale is not commensurate with corporate salaries.” P1 said, “Compensation is not as competitive as other retail organizations are.”

As explained in the employee handbook, compensations are benefits such as training opportunities, receiving a gratuitous gift card as an award for providing excellent customer service, and recommended for either employee of the month or employee of the year. P2 said that one motivational benefit the organization uses for sales associates are gift cards in gratitude for delivering exceptional customer service. P3 explained, “For a sales associate to receive an award such as a gift card, the performance has to be exceptional.” P4 stated, “Usually, gift cards are given during holidays, such as the 4th of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.” Gift cards could be given on any day when a sales associate delivered exceptional service; however, the holidays are the most popular time of year for giving out gift cards and other awards.

I asked the participants their views on opportunities for rewarding relative to motivating sales associates. Rewarding and recognizing employees gives a feeling of pride, fellowship, and common loyalty towards an organization (Davis, 2013). Documents I reviewed from the organization such as archives of meeting notes from June, July, August, and September 2016 validated previous research findings reported by Van Dyk and Coetzee (2012) that compensation is essential for opportunities for training, employee development, and work-life balance. Davis (2013) noted that most workers are ecstatic when they receive a reward.

P1 indicated that, at the beginning of every board of directors meeting, business managers in the organization recognize those sales associates who exceeded the standards in sales, productivity, and customer service for the organization. P2 said when a sales associate goes “above and beyond organizational standards” in displaying excellent customer service, “usually a gratuitous award such as a gift card, is given to the sales associate or a cash bonus will be added on their next pay check.” Findings related to this theme revealed these strategies are among the most important success factors for achieving sustainable development in retail operations.

James and Mathew (2012) noted that effective communication is one factor leading to meeting organizational commitment. Concepts in the SSCM theory indicated sustainability strategies are important for influencing workers to have situational awareness of organizational goals and their roles in achieving them. Value, ethics, and risk management that include contingency planning are additional concepts in the SSCM conceptual framework. Retail managers who communicate effectively with their employees can influence employees to have the situational awareness needed to maintain the competitive advantage of the organization, resulting in increased profitability. In addition, retail managers could use their capabilities, knowledge, and experience as a continuous innovation process that could help society by providing customer(s) with the best products and lower prices than other retail organizations.

Theme 2: Ethical Factors

Theme 2 revealed ethical factors used by retail managers to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against rivals. This theme relates to Interview Question 2 and Interview Question 3. Business managers must be situationally aware of ethical factors when managing their employees. In supporting this theme, P1 said that honesty and trust are essential factors; P2 elaborated by stating managers must "trust employees to do their job without being micromanaged." P4 said an ethical motivational technique that works well is honesty and integrity; honesty and integrity enhance a person's character. P4 noted the importance of "simply listening and allowing my workers to provide feedback." I asked P4 to explain the motivational technique of listening to workers; P4 responded, "Listening to feedback and implementing a worker's ideas give the worker a feeling of pride towards the organization, especially if the idea is productive and generates profit."

P3 said, "Knowing my associates and their capabilities is a factor of how much I would trust myself to trust them." P3 continued, explaining that to ensure potential sales associates fit the culture of the organization, the organizational leaders conduct a background check to ensure no negative actions are pending. P1 noted senior managers in the organization "enforce honesty, integrity, and loyalty to one another and to their customers."

P2 said, "Effective communication and taking an interest in sales associates' work ethics are essential motivational strategies." P3 said, "Listening to sales associates and involving sales associates in daily management meetings gives them the feeling of pride, dedication, and loyalty to the organization and their customers." Singh (2012) noted that in managing competitive advantage, senior-level managers must consider the right personnel with a specific set of skills (training), experience, and resources needed for successful operations.

Findings from interviews with study participants revealed the importance of effective communication, honesty, and trust, listening to employees, and allowing feedback as essential ethical factors. The participants said they are situationally aware when managing their sales associates. Van Dyk and Coetzee (2012) opined supervisor support, work-life balances, and listening and encouraging employee feedback are essential strategies for maintaining an effective working environment. In addition, Hewitt (2012) believed valuing employees by providing purpose direction and motivation increases employees' motivation in the workplace.

Although the Company standard operating procedures mentioned professionalism, personal appearance, and dress code in the employee handbook, managers are required to give their employees quarterly performance counseling. Quarterly counseling, as documented in the employee handbook, includes coaching, teaching, and mentoring so employees can be successful in the organization. The motivational factor in counseling is the opportunity for additional training for advancement if an employee follows the policies and procedures outlined in the employee handbook (must be read by all employees).

The results indicated that for those employees who need additional motivation, the employee handbook places responsibility on the manager to provide additional coaching, teaching, and mentoring. Managers with effective leadership styles provide (a) a purpose denoting the objectives of the organization, (b) direction that outlines the way to meet the objectives of the organization, and (c) motivation by awarding workers for outstanding work performance. Workers who lead by example are the ones chosen for positions of greater responsibility (Singh, 2012).

Theme 3: Risk Factors

Theme 3 revealed risk factors in motivating sales associates to maintain competitive advantage. This theme reflected responses to Question 4. Per SSCM theory, supply chain risk management is critical in retail operations; therefore, managers must implement measures in their daily operations to reduce the probability and impact of adverse occurrences. Bharathy and McShane (2014) indicated risk management processes include identifying risks and sources of risks, evaluating risks, and selecting and implementing risk management strategies.

Implementing risk management in a business organization to gain and maintain a competitive advantage can be challenging for management teams. Developing risk management capabilities is another challenge (Elahi, 2013). Spiegler et al. (2012) explained potential risk involves any possibility of a mismatch between supply and demand, along with serving customers inefficiently.

P1 commented on the risks associated with managing sales associates. For example, P1 said a risk in managing sales associates involves "giving guidance to meet specific timelines, and ensuring all sales associates are trained to standards to substitute for their peers when needed." The risk is to have the trust and confidence in employees to fulfill an assigned task to meet organizational goals (Bharathy & McShane, 2014).

P2 spoke from prior military experience and explained, "Anyone can maintain the standard set forth in organizational standard operating procedure and employee handbooks (honesty, integrity, work ethics, job performance); therefore, exceeding organizational standards could result in awards, promotions, and increased productivity." Elahi (2013) indicated organizations with inferior supply chain performance do not meet customer requirements such as product availability and on-time delivery, which stems from not implementing effective risk management. Findings related to this theme revealed that integrating risk management in retail operations reduces the likelihood and impact of adverse occurrences. Any single point of failure will lead to disruptions in the supply chain network, leading to other risks in supply chain operations (Lee, Yeung et al., 2012). Retail managers need to manage supply chain risk and vulnerability to avoid costly disruptions and negative consequences for the organization.

Theme 4: Value of Sustainable Strategies

Theme 4 revealed the value of sustainable strategies toward stakeholders, suppliers, and customers. This theme emerged from participants' responses to Interview Question 6. P1 explained that providing excellent customer service is one of the highest priorities of the organization. In addition, P1 commented during their weekly staff meetings, “Senior managers in the organization tend to find ways to enhance customer satisfaction and improve supplier relationships.” Sustainable strategies such as showing courtesy and professionalism toward customers and improving suppliers’ relationships represent important success factors for achieving sustainable development in organizations.

P2 mentioned during an organization board of directors meeting conducted in September 2016, the success of the organization would not have been possible without the “significant contributions” of the entire staff, stakeholders included. I asked P2 to explain the significant contributions of the staff and stakeholders. P2 explained, “The general manager tends to take an interest in the sales associates’ performance because they are the ones closest to the customer.” I asked P2 to explain the meaning of “closest to the customer.” P2 clarified, “The sales associates are the ones that actually help promote products and sales by displaying genuine customer courtesy to all customers.”

P3 commented, “The consistent use of effective communication from our general managers is phenomenal.” P4 commented, “Senior managers within the organization encourage an environment that allows for self-improvement.” P2 mentioned, “When sales associates go above and beyond their normal duties and responsibilities, sometimes an award is given in the form of a gift card and or a sales associate would receive an increase in their salary.” P2 added that when units are deployed overseas, sales normally decrease.

P1 stated, “Allowing feedback from sales associates and making them feel their suggestions are heard and used is a motivating factor.” I asked P1, P2, P3, and P4 how often the employee handbook was updated, and what changes they had noticed in the handbook. P1 replied, “The employee handbook has been updated every year since I’ve been employed here.” P1 continued, “All managers must ensure their workers must be familiar with any changes.”

P2 said, “Normally once a year, or sooner if something significant needs to be added such as a qualification for a specific area (e.g., electronics).” P3 stated, “I believe once a year; I was employed in 2013, and each year I remember receiving a revised copy of an employee handbook.” P4 said, “Annually and since being employed with this organization, noticed an increased in gratuitous awards, which is given for outstanding job performance.”

The employee handbook is an importance tool in the organization. It helps managers to provide the purpose, direction, and motivation to employee in support of meeting organizations goals. In reviewing the employee handbook and meeting notes from July 2016 and September 2016, senior managers showed concern for employees. The employees are the ones who meet and greet the customers.

In reviewing meeting notes from June, July, and August 2016, some integrated strategies mentioned were managers providing employees with additional meaning to the objectives and goals of the organization, providing direction in how to meet the objectives of the organization (ensuring employees are trained to do their job), and providing motivation by awarding those employees who provide outstanding customer service. The employee handbook mentioned customer satisfaction as a primary goal for the organization because satisfied customers are loyal; customer loyalty is appreciated by managers. In addition, displaying good customer service assisted with integrating environmental and social issues such as having lower price on essential items, which is good for the community, and would increase profits for the organization.

As indicated in meeting notes from September 2016 and in the standard operating procedure, sales associates are required to show professionalism and be courteous to their customers. Employees who display honesty and integrity to customers are good for business, which is one of the primary functions in the organization. Winter and Knemeyer (2013) explained indicated the objective of a supply chain is to include value in the form of products and services delivered to customers in a timely manner, with good communication and service to the stakeholder and suppliers.

Findings related to this theme indicated managers must develop innovativeness and support broader sustainability to ensure their consumers, the business, supply chain, stakeholders, community, environmental relationships, and interactions remain viable. Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) noted that managers need to go one step further and collaborate with their suppliers. A key component of SSCM theory is meeting integrated sustainable strategies, meeting objectives and goals of the organization, and achieving organizational goals through teamwork and relationships with senior managers, subordinate managers, and staff.

Managers should implement good strategies before difficult times occur because, in difficult times, a suitable solution may not emerge. Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) noted improving the long-term economic performance of the individual organization and its supply chains are worthwhile objectives. Reviewing standard operating procedures and the employee handbook, as well as improving long-term performance of employees would allow managers to improve sustainability within the organization. Characteristics such as integrated strategies and organizational culture involve value, ethics, and risk management (Touboulic & Walker, 2014).

Applications to Professional Practice

Four themes emerged from the data. The four retail managers I interviewed reflected these themes as strategies to motivate sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage. Strategies to motivate sales associates must begin with knowing the employees’ strengths and weaknesses. Knowing employees’ capabilities allows managers to assign task or areas of responsibilities to those sales associates most competent to achieve success. Those who are less than competent would receive the training to accomplish their assigned areas of responsibilities.

The employee handbook included a section that requires retail managers to brief new sales associates on their duties and responsibilities upon assignment to the section. Therefore, managers must ensure all sales associate meet the standard set forth in the employee handbook: including trained staff members. Strategies that were successful in motivating sales associates were (a) providing good compensation and benefits, (b) allowing opportunities for promotion and rewards, (c) effective communications, and (d) honesty and trust.

Effective communication and taking an interest in sales associates’ work ethics are essential motivational strategies (Spiegler et al., 2012). Listening to sales associates and involving sales associates in daily section meetings gives them the feeling of pride, dedication, and loyalty to the organization and their customers. Implementing risk management in a business organization to gain and maintain a competitive advantage might be challenging for some managers. Risk includes managers having to trust and have confidence in employees to fulfill an assigned task to meet organizational goals. Another risk factor for managers is the possibility of a mismatch between supply and demand, along with serving customers inefficiently (Spiegler et al., 2012).

An increase in profitability from sales and services may generate opportunities for promotion, rewards, and other gratuitous benefits to sales associates. Increased profitability is good for stakeholders, suppliers, and customers. The findings of this study reflected the views of four retail managers employed by a midsized retail organization in the southeastern United States. These four retail managers discussed best practices and strategies they used to encourage and motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage over their rivals.

Retail managers who implement effective supply chain management improvement programs can enhance performance, which can have a positive social impact in organizations. Establishing sustainability strategies could aid retail managers in applying motivational strategies to inspire their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail organization. Retail managers could use this information to improve their understanding of sustainable strategies that could increase productivity in their organization, which could help them to maintain a competitive advantage.

Strategies to achieve competitive advantages must start with supply chain managers taking the lead by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to their sales associates to meet business goals, mission, and values. Sustainable strategies such as showing courtesy and professionalism toward customers and improving suppliers' relationship represent important success factors for achieving sustainable development in organizations. The findings of this study paralleled those reported in the literature review and SSCM theory, indicating that organizational managers need to provide purpose, direction, and motivation to their sales associates to meet business goals, mission, and values.

Implications for Social Change

Hiring sales associates to fill positions in retail organizations is a way to gain and maintain high-quality performance, which is important for a business to achieve customer satisfaction, which increases profitability. An increase in profitability ensures continued employment, providing for economic stability in the community. Meeting customers' needs and providing hospitality improves customer trust and loyalty, allowing the organization to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry. Takatsuka (2011) asserted hiring managers may reduce organizational cost by using transition assistance programs as effective hiring strategies. Improper hiring techniques increase business cost because of employee turnover (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). The results of this study revealed a number of sustainability strategies retail managers can use to motivate sales associates. First, managers need to know their employees’ job descriptions and capabilities. Second, managers must use effective communications. Third, managers must provide good compensation and benefits. Fourth, managers must provide opportunities for promotion and rewards. Fifth, managers must practice the strategy of honesty, trust, and integrity to maintain a competitive advantage in the retail industry.

Employing hard-working, motivated, qualified, and efficient sales associates is beneficial for retail managers. Qualified and motivated workers remain with businesses for longer periods of time (Harrell & Berglass, 2012). The need to fill positions in the retail industry could have an impact on organizational hiring practices. Arendt and Sapp (2014) determined business managers employ strategies to hire employees based on job requirements and organizational fit.

Hiring inadequate or unqualified employees increases direct costs for a business (Blatter, Muehlemann, & Schenker, 2012). Direct costs include recruitment, which could entail a background check, training, and education for new employees (Brænder & Andersen, 2013). Hiring managers in retail operations must make effective hiring decisions to gain and retain the best qualified employees and thereby maintain competitive advantage (Arendt & Sapp, 2014). Motivated and qualified employees tend to remain with their organizations, which is good for employees and their families, as well as the business, the community, and the economy.

Competitive advantage in the second decade of the 21st century is transient; market conditions are always changing (Bonini & Bove, 2014). Decision makers such as managers in some organizations were not prepared to weather and overcome economic crises in the first decade of the 21st century because they lacked a well-planned strategy (Shatat & Udin, 2012). Ageron et al. (2012) noted supply chain management requires managers to integrate environmental and social issues without improving operational efficiency to maintain a competitive advantage in business operations. In retail operations, some managers are aware of the importance of their partners’ sustainable responsibility in their development (Gligor, 2014). Therefore, if managers motivate and support sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage, this could allow the organization to keep those loyal customers and gain the trust of new customers. An increase of customers would contribute to the success and wellbeing of employees, productivity, and the community.

The findings of this study may contribute to social change by addressing hiring challenges retail managers face. When retail managers understand and apply effective hiring strategies in retail operations, the results include successfully hiring skilled employees, which could decrease the community unemployment rate and save taxpayer dollars. When retail managers understand the strategies needed for hiring skilled employees for organizational fit, hiring costs and challenges decrease and the business reputation increases in the community. When retail managers hire qualified employees, the business may grow in the community and contribute to the success and wellbeing of the employees, families, and economy in the community.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to research successful strategies that retail managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against rivals. Retail managers must provide purpose, direction, and motivation to their employees to maintain competitive against their rivals. Providing the purpose of the organization objectives and goals, providing direction denoting employees' roles in meeting objectives of the organization, and instilling motivation by awarding those employees who provide outstanding customer service are essential in retail operations.

Internal daily meetings to establish daily agendas for employees give employees the purpose, direction, and motivation they need to meet organizations objectives. In reviewing the employee handbook and archives from June, July, August, and September meeting notes, senior-level managers offered opportunities for those employees with excellence job performance. Job performance noted in each employee monthly counseling, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. Employees with excellent job performance could receive either a gratuitous award on their next check, recommendation for employee of the month, or employee of year for consecutive excellent job performance, and the opportunity for promotion.

Current and future retail managers should consider the findings of this study as an approach to understand sustainable strategies that could assist them with providing purpose, direction, and motivation to their employees to meet organizations objectives and goals. I recommend retail managers in the southeastern United States pay close attention to the results in this study and share them with peers. I will provide my contributors (community partners, stakeholders, and interviewees) with the findings and conclusions of this study through email and hard copies. I offered to share this information with contributors. The results of this study may be beneficial to current and future retail managers by revealing successful strategies that retail managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against rivals. Findings of this study may be disseminated through literature, organizational conferences, and monthly training meetings.

Recommendations for Further Research

The focus of this qualitative case study was on successful strategies that retail managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against other midsized retailers. My study included managers employed by a midsized retail organization in the southeastern United States, where decision makers implemented successful strategies to maintain a competitive advantage against their rivals. The results of this study do not represent the overall population of organizations. The primary limitation was the singular geographic location of the participants.

In addition, my focus was exclusively on midsized retail organizations, and the results may only be applicable to similarly structured retail organizations, which may limit the generalizability of these sustainable strategies to a larger organization. I recommend further study include replicating the current study with retail organizations in other geographical locations and with both larger, smaller, and more diverse populations, both in employees and customers. A quantitative analysis determining how often managers and employees utilize employee handbook to address problems would also be worthwhile, to establish the most important element to be addressed. Another qualitative analysis should address the effectiveness of different styles of employee handbooks.

Reflections

During tenure in the U.S. Army, my military occupational skill was supply and logistics operations. As a retired Army veteran, I have transformed from military supply and logistics operations to civilian supply and logistics in retail operations. My interest was to explore strategies that managers of retail organizations use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against their rivals. I explored strategies that successful retail managers use to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against their rivals.

Strategies discovered in this study included effective communication, allowing feedback from employees, and using their ideas are ways to make employees feel part of a team. Giving employees the recognition they deserve by implementing their idea could motivate employees to take additional initiative to maintain the competitive advantage.

The goal for my retail operation was to have the best logistical section in the 82D Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which I did. My experience in the doctoral study process was interesting. I was told pursuing a doctoral degree would be challenging; therefore, I became focused on pursuing a doctoral degree in global supply chain management.

After serving 29 years in the military, I had no preconceived or personal biases, and did not encounter any biases relative to any research study, participants, or situations. I entered the DBA program with an open mind and the intention to learn the civilian side of supply and logistics operations. The scenario of supply and logistics may be slightly different, but the goals are the same, such as producing the best product for the customer, resulting in customer satisfaction, and the importance of maintaining the competitive advantage by being situationally aware of rival retailers.

Summary and Study Conclusions

I achieved data saturation when no additional data, themes, or information emerged. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies that managers of retail organizations used to motivate their sales associates to maintain a competitive advantage against rival retailers. Some essential strategies used by retail managers in this study were knowing employees' capabilities, such as strengths and weaknesses, and the importance of effective communications.

Knowing employees' capabilities and providing effective communication are two strategies used to motivate employees to maintain a competitive advantage against rival retail organizations. Successful strategies enable organizations to grow in the community and contribute to the success and wellbeing of the employees, families, and the economy in the community. Strategies used by retail managers in this study aided in establishing the construction of a dental clinic, a recreation center with a swimming pool, a sports center that members of the community could use for social gatherings, and a vitamin store for the active military, retirees, and civilian community.

Findings from this study highlighted four emergent themes of strategies used by managers to motivate their sales associates (employees) to maintain competitive advantage, resulting increased profitability: (a) essential strategies - knowing the capabilities (strength and weaknesses) of employees, (b) ethical factors – knowing employees work ethics, effective communication, honesty, and trust, (c) risk factors - identifying risks and sources of risks, evaluating risks, and selecting and implementing risk management strategies, and (d) value of sustainable strategies - developing innovativeness and support broader sustainability strategies to ensure customers, the business, supply chain, stakeholders, the community, environmental relationships, and interactions remain viable. Retail managers who communicate effectively with their employees can influence them to have the situational awareness needed to maintain the competitive advantage in their organization, resulting in good customer satisfaction and increased profitability.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I. Introduce self to the participant(s).

II. Present consent form, go over contents, answer questions and concerns of participant(s).

III. Give participant copy of consent form.

IV. Turn on the audio recording device.

V. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to the final question.

VI. Follow up with additional questions and collect company documents.

VII. End interview sequence; discuss member checking with participant(s).

VIII. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants.

X. End protocol.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What sustainable strategies have you used to motivate your sales associates?
2. What ethical factors did you find worked best to motivate your sales associates?
3. How did your sales associates respond to your different motivation techniques?
4. What were some of the risk factors you encountered in maintaining a competitive advantage?
5. What are the methods you used to motivate your sales associates to support sustainability strategies you or other members of your management team implemented in your organization?
6. What value does your sustainable strategy provide to your stakeholders, suppliers, and customers?