

ANTECEDENTS OF DISTRIBUTORS TURNOVER IN MULTILEVEL MARKETING

Dr. Abdul Assis Koroath,

Associate Professor,
Dept. of Commerce,
Govt. College Madappally, Kerala, India.

ABSTRACT

The concept of Multilevel Marketing or referral marketing is a method of product distribution. The products are moved through independent distributors. The distributors are given an opportunity to introduce other distributors to the business. Instead of incurring massive media advertising and sales promotion cost, the savings are passed on to distributor consumers. At the same time products are available to consumers at wholesale prices.

Despite the worldwide growth in direct sales, sales force turnover continues to constitute a major problem for direct selling organisations. The level of attrition comes at a significant cost, not only in terms of recruiting, but also in terms of customer dissatisfaction at losing their direct seller contact with whom they have possibly built a valued relationship. This paper describes the problems and sets out a research paradigm to investigate the issue of distributor's turnover in multilevel marketing in Kerala's environment.

This study focuses in particular on the following key areas of research: unmet expectations, job image, job satisfaction, and stated intention to quit as antecedents of distributor turnover in multilevel marketing.

Keywords: *Multilevel Marketing, Attrition, Met expectations, Job image, job satisfaction, Intention to quit.*

Introduction:

Multi-Level Marketing (MLM) is gaining much attention in business circles recently. In order to eliminate the defects associated with the present system of marketing as regards to distribution channel, promotion and advertising; there is a need for a new strategy in marketing. Direct selling is an innovative version of the direct channel system.

The concept of Multilevel Marketing or referral marketing is a method of product distribution. The products are moved through independent distributors. The distributors are given an opportunity to introduce other distributors to the business. Instead of incurring massive media advertising and sales promotion cost, the savings are passed on to distributor consumers. Distributors share the large revenue that normally goes to the middleman. At the same time products are available to consumers at wholesale prices.

Despite this worldwide growth in direct sales both as a selling system and as a career opportunity, sales force

turnover continues to constitute a major problem for direct selling organisations. The average turnover rate in the United Kingdom and Europe exceeds 100 per cent per annum. This level of attrition comes at a significant cost, not only in terms of recruiting, but also in terms of the less tangible expense of customer dissatisfaction at losing their direct seller contact with whom they have possibly built a valued relationship.

This paper describes the problems and sets out a research paradigm to investigate the issue of distributor's turnover in multilevel marketing in Kerala's environment.

The study focuses in particular on the following key areas of research: unmet expectations, job image, job satisfaction, and stated intention to quit as antecedents of distributor turnover in multilevel marketing.

Review of Literature:

Met expectation is the discrepancy between what a person encounters on the job, in terms of positive and

negative experiences, and what they expect to encounter, and that people can have very different expectations about individual conditions or circumstances of a job, such that a specified job condition may not have a consistent effect on a person's decision to quit, or not. When a large enough gap exists between original expectations about what the job has to offer and what was actually delivered, then termination is likely to occur.

Wotruba and Tyagi (1991) in their research using a direct selling sample, found a strong relationship between met expectations and the propensity to quit. Brodie argues in his (1995) thesis that this "comparison between expectations and actual experiences is the critical factor which may affect the person's intention to quit". Under this background the present study investigated whether there is any discrepancy between expectations and the reality.

Studies undertaken in the United States by Wotruba and Tyagi (1991) exploring the relationships and reverse causality relationships of certain variables to turnover were used by Brodie (1995) as a basis to identify antecedents of turnover in the United Kingdom and France. Survey results support the earlier American findings and confirm that the following key variables contribute significantly to reasons for this high turnover:

- Low met expectations;
- Poor job image;
- Inadequate job satisfaction; and
- Intention to quit.

Porter and Steers (1973) define met expectations as: The discrepancy between what a person encounters on the job, in terms of positive and negative experiences, and what they expect to encounter, and that people can have very different expectations about individual conditions or circumstances of a job, such that a specified job condition may not have a consistent effect on a person's decision to quit, or not. Porter and Steers predicted that when a large enough gap exists between original expectations about what the job has to offer and what was actually delivered, then termination is likely to occur.

Thus, Porter and Steers postulate that job dissatisfaction mediates the relationship between unmet expectations and turnover. Notably, Porter and Steers' (1973) operational definition of met expectations centres on the discrepancy between one's initial expectations and one's subsequent perceptions. Only the expectations of salient aspects of the job (e.g., pay, promotion, supervisor relations, and peer group interactions) are included in the met expectations hypothesis espoused by Porter and Steers. They state that individuals have varying salient expectation sets, depending on which job aspects are most important to the individual.

Research undertaken by Mason (1965) Mobley (1979) suggests that when a person perceives that the image their job role portrays is unsatisfactory; their level of job satisfaction is lowered. Subsequent research (Mobley et al 1979; Porter and Steers 1973; Spencer and Steers 1981) has shown that job satisfaction is a strong predictor of turnover.

Locke and Lathan (1976) give a comprehensive definition of job satisfaction as pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experience. Job satisfaction is a result of employee's perception of how well their job provides those things that are viewed as important. According to (Mitchell and Lasan, 1987), it is generally recognized in the organizational behaviour field that job satisfaction is the most important and frequently studied attitude. While Luthan (1998) posited that there are three important dimensions to job satisfaction:

- Job satisfaction is an emotional response to a job situation. As such it cannot be seen, it can only be inferred.
- Job satisfaction is often determined by how well outcome meet or exceed expectations.

"Job satisfaction is one of the most widely studied constructs in sales force research" (Brown & Peterson, 1993, p. 63). From an organization's perspective, satisfied employees have been shown to exhibit greater commitment to the organization (Koch & Steers, 1978; Marsh & Mannari, 1977), higher performance (Mowday, 1982), and lower tendency to leave the organization (e.g., Brown & Peterson, 1993; Cohen, 1993; Futrell & Parasuraman, 1984; Johnston, 1990). Job satisfaction is a recognized correlate of organizational commitment and intention to stay (Porter, Crampon, & Smith, 1976). Several studies depict job satisfaction as a mediator for other antecedents such as role ambiguity and role conflict (Brown & Peterson, 1993; Sager, 1994). In consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction literature, satisfaction is also shown to mediate relationships between other antecedents and intentions/behaviour (LaBarbera & Mazursky, 1983).

Considerable research has been devoted to developing predictive turnover models which include job satisfaction as one of the most commonly proposed antecedents. This has been generally supported (Futrell and Parasuraman 1984; Judge 1993; Michaels and Spector 1982; Mobley et al 1979; Tett and Meyer 1993; Schneider and Snyder 1975).

Intention to leave can be defined as one's behaviour intention to cease working. In their Turnover Model, Wunder (1982) also measured intent to leave as a surrogate for actual turnover. Their model was used as a guide for the research of Good et al (1988) who were able to confirm the linkages from the role

stressors identified by Wunderman to intention to leave by retail managers. They acknowledge, however, that data collection is needed to determine the degree to which intent does predict turnover

In the direct selling industry, turnover rates among direct salespeople of up to 100% have been reported in the literature (Granfield & Nicols 1975; Wotruba, Scigliompaglia & Tyagi 1987; Wotruba 1990; Brodie & Stanworth 1998). Given the considerable investment that must be made in the recruitment and training of new direct salespeople, controlling the cost of turnover has become an important strategic issue that direct salespeople need to address.

It is not only the costs directly associated with the turnover that are at issue. High rates of sales force turnover can also impact negatively on customers. Customers who are poorly serviced as a result of a lack of continuity in their relationship with their distributor can create unfavourable perceptions of a direct selling organisation. Raymond & Tanner (1994) argue that there are many cases of customers developing negative perceptions as a direct consequence of the frustration experienced when the distributors supplying them with their products leave the organisation.

Significance of the Study

Distributors' turnover is a complex construct which has generated a huge body of literature; however, very little research has been applied to direct selling organisations which experience annual turnover in excess of 100%. Still it remains one of the key areas of concern to the industry itself. Therefore one of the aims of this paper is to identify key factors relating to distributors turnover in multilevel marketing in the context of Kerala by testing some important variables obtained from the literature.

Statement of the Problem

In order to understand the problem of distributor's turnover in MLM, the study focuses on the involvement and long stay of distributors in MLM activities. The level of attrition comes at a significant cost, not only in terms of recruiting, but also in terms of the less tangible expense of customer dissatisfaction at losing their direct seller contact with whom they have possibly built a valued relationship.

Objectives of the Study:

The study is conducted with the following objectives.

1. To identify and test the antecedents of turnover among MLM distributors in Kerala's work environment.
2. To examine the effect of job image, met expectations and job satisfaction on the intention to quit and, subsequently, turnover of distributors in multilevel marketing.

The present study is intended to know the problem of distributor's turnover in multilevel marketing in Kerala. For this purpose the researcher approached distributors cum customers of four well known multilevel companies operating in Kerala namely Amway, Modicare, Avon and DXN India. The said companies are chosen because they are all affiliated to IDSA and very popular in the multilevel marketing circles of Kerala.

Research Methodology:

The present study was an empirical effort to assess the antecedents of turnover intentions among MLM distributors in Kerala. The survey research design method was used for the study. The present study is based on both primary and secondary data. The empirical data for this study was obtained through a survey conducted among the distributors of sample companies. It involves using a self-designed questionnaire in collecting data from the respondents.

Population of this research is defined to be the adults over 18 years residing in three regions of Kerala who have enrolled as distributors of any of these MLM companies whether they are active or inactive.

The sample used in this study consists of 614 distributors cum customers. Convenience sampling was used for primary data collection. The whole state of Kerala is divided into three strata based on the geographical locations namely the southern Kerala, central Kerala and the north Kerala.

Questionnaires were given to all participants irrespective of their demographic features. Thus participation of distributors from all walks of life was ensured. The questionnaire was pretested using a convenience sample of 25 distributors. The final questionnaire was prepared using a pilot study.

Data Analysis

Various statistical tools were used for analysing data gathered through the administration of the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion:

The table 1 exhibits that there were 518 male and 96 female respondents. This indicates the very low participation of female distributors in MLM activities. Thus it is evident that females are not much attracted to the multilevel marketing system. The mean age of the respondents was 37 years. As 45 percent of the distributors belong to the age category of 30 to 40, it is concluded that they are more fascinated to this new system of marketing than other age groups. The table exhibits that the majority of respondents (64%) were married. They were also asked to indicate the type of family they live in and majority of respondents (72%) live as

nuclear family. The table shows that fifty three percent of respondents lived in urban area and 27% lives in semi-urban area and 20 % of the respondents live in rural area. Thus it is seen that more than half of respondents resided in urban areas.

Table reveals that 44% of the respondents had SSLC or below qualification, 22% higher secondary and only 21% had a college or other degree. The table also shows that the percentage of respondents who attained S.S.L.C or below education is the highest (56%) in northern region. Table demonstrates that about 39% of the respondents were unemployed, 42 % of the respondents were in government or private service and 19 % of respondents were employed in business or professions.

Table -1: Demographic Features of Multilevel Marketing Distributors

| Variable | Response Categories | n | % |
|--------------------|------------------------|-----|----|
| Gender | Male | 518 | 84 |
| | Female | 96 | 16 |
| Age Group | 18-30 | 197 | 32 |
| | 30-40 | 278 | 45 |
| | Above- 40 | 139 | 23 |
| Marital status | Married | 393 | 64 |
| | Unmarried | 221 | 36 |
| Place of residence | Urban | 325 | 53 |
| | Semi-urban | 167 | 27 |
| | Rural | 122 | 20 |
| Education | SSLC | 268 | 44 |
| | HSC | 134 | 22 |
| | Graduation | 130 | 21 |
| | Others | 82 | 13 |
| Employment | Govt. or Private | 257 | 42 |
| | Business or profession | 119 | 19 |
| | Unemployed | 238 | 39 |

Source: Survey Data

The respondents were asked on the various promises or expectation that offered to them at the time of joining as a distributor. Several answers were possible and they were instructed to check all that apply. These responses are exhibited in table. 2. It is obvious that quick return on investments and huge permanent income are the main offers put before the respondents to motivate them to join as distributors. Therefore it is concluded that many of these respondents are joined in multilevel marketing due to its attractive promises given to them.

Table -2: Promises Offered to Distributors

| Promises Offered | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Huge permanent income | 76 |
| Time freedom | 67 |
| Full time employment | 68 |
| Use quality products | 74 |
| Buying of products at discounted rate | 68 |
| Recognition in the society | 37 |

Source: Survey Data

As a continuation of the above, respondents were asked whether they could say that these expectations were true based on their personal experience. Expectations is measured using a 7-point Likert scale consisting of six items measuring the respondent's actual experience to date against what they had expected in terms of both work and personal experiences. The scale was ranked from strongly disagree to strongly agree on the seven point Likert type scale. The resultant descriptive statistics is given in table 3.

Table-3: Met Expectations of Distributors

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|
| Huge permanent income | 3.3 | 1.50 |
| Time freedom | 3.0 | 1.78 |
| Full time employment | 3.5 | 1.64 |
| Use quality products | 2.83 | 0.75 |
| Buying of products at discounted rate | 3.17 | 1.94 |
| Recognition in the society | 3.5 | 0.54 |

Source: Survey Data

Table 3 reveals that most respondents mean score is less than expected score of 3.5 and it indicates that most of the respondents answered negatively to their real experience towards expectations. It shows that expectations are not properly met. Thus it is assumed that these promises were either exaggerated or not real. Such offers are made to attract prospects to join multilevel marketing.

Research undertaken by Mason (1965) suggests that when a person perceives that the image their job role portrays is unsatisfactory; their level of job satisfaction is lowered. Subsequent research (Mobley et al 1979; Porter and Steers 1973; Spencer and Steers 1981) has shown that job satisfaction is a strong predictor of turnover. Job image was measured by Likert scale assessing the individual's perceptions of how people feel about direct salespeople and direct selling companies. The scale was ranked from strongly disagree to strongly agree on the five point Likert type scale. The resultant descriptive statistics is given in table 4.

Table -4: Public Image of MLM

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---|------|------|
| Working in a reputed company | 3.17 | 1.47 |
| Have a good job compared to friends | 2.67 | 0.82 |
| Have a good job compared to relatives | 3.0 | 1.26 |
| Friend's and relative's image on job | 1.83 | 0.41 |
| Social interaction related with the job | 2.17 | 0.75 |
| Positive attitude to life | 3.50 | 0.81 |

Source: Survey Data

Table 4 reveals that most respondents mean score is less than expected score of 3.5 and it indicates that most of the respondents answered negatively to the very idea of job image towards MLM business. It shows that MLM business transmits only a poor job image among distributors.

Job satisfaction is one of the independent variables used in the study. Considerable research has been devoted to developing predictive turnover models which include job satisfaction as one of the most commonly proposed antecedents. Job satisfaction is, therefore, considered to be a major determinant of turnover and will be measured by a 6-item index by means of a 7-point Likert scale designed to measure the level of satisfaction the individual feels about the several aspects of direct selling listed. The scale was ranked from strongly disagree to strongly agree on the seven point Likert type scale. The reliability coefficient of job satisfaction in this study was .92. The resultant descriptive statistics is given in table 5.

Table-5: Job Satisfaction of Distributors

| Items | Mean | SD |
|------------------------------------|------|------|
| Feel enjoyment with the job | 3.17 | 1.17 |
| Like job better than others | 2.83 | 0.75 |
| Not bored with the job | 3.13 | 0.75 |
| Enthusiastic about job | 2.50 | 0.83 |
| Fairly well satisfied with the job | 3.00 | 2.09 |
| Optimistic to my career | 3.17 | 2.13 |

Source: Survey Data

Table 5 reveals that most respondents mean score is less than expected score of 3.5 and it indicates that most of the respondents answered negatively to the enquiry with respect to job satisfaction in MLM business. It shows that MLM business provides very little satisfaction to the distributors.

Intention to leave can be defined as one's behaviour intention to cease working. Turnover intentions, the dependent variable of the study, were assessed using three items adapted from Donnelly and Ivancevich (1985). The statements or items in the instrument measure the probability of MLM distributor's intention to leave with the organization with the following statements:

1. It is likely that I will actively search for a new job next year";
2. I often think about quitting" and
3. I will probably leave this company during the next year".

Each item is represented with seven point Likert response scale to indicate their likelihood of leaving the organization in the near or distant future. A higher score indicates a higher intention to leave the organization. The reliability test of this construct is .89. The scale was ranked from strongly disagree to strongly agree on the seven point Likert type scale.

Table -6: Intention to Leave MLM

| Items | Mean | SD |
|---|------|------|
| Actively search for a new job | 5.67 | 1.21 |
| Often think about quitting | 5.00 | 0.89 |
| Probably leave the company in near future | 5.50 | 0.83 |

Source: Survey Data

The percentage of respondents who have never considered leaving their direct selling activity is considerably different from that of Brodie's (1995) study, which reported 57% of UK respondents and 45% French respondents in that category. In the present study this combined category comprised almost 32% of the sample. This means that the sample used for the study is relatively not stable and not much committed to the direct selling activity. This finding is agreed with the findings of all previous research on this issue was predicated on high turnover.

Met Expectation and Job Satisfaction

Table -7: Correlation: Job Satisfaction with Met Expectations and Public Image of MLM

| Items | Correlation | Significance level |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Met expectations | 0.879 | p<01 |
| Public image of MLM | 0.739 | p<01 |

Source: Survey Data

A positive relationship between the met expectations and subsequent satisfaction was also found in the study. Of all correlations calculated, the highest correlation coefficient was found between met expectations and job satisfaction ($r = 0.879$ significant at $p < 01$), indicating a particularly strong positive relationship between these two variables.

Therefore, ensuring that a new recruit's expectations are met should be a priority for MLM companies. Realistic job previews and careful socialisation into the organisation create realistic expectations and could contribute to satisfaction and commitment. Unrealistic pre-entry expectations that are not subsequently met

may result in a decline in satisfaction with the activity and less strength of commitment.

Public Image of MLM and Job Satisfaction

The results of the study showed a positive relationship between the public image of MLM and the level of satisfaction of distributors experience from being part of the industry and the way they feel about the organisation they have chosen to work with.

The highly significant correlations between the variables in the present study ($r = 0.739$ significant at $p < 01$) supply credence to the concept that the general job satisfaction of distributors and the public image of MLM business are positively and strongly related.

As perceived public image declines so, too, does their level of satisfaction and commitment. Consequently, positively promoting the industry becomes a priority for the direct selling industry as a whole.

Met Expectations, Job Image, Job Satisfaction and the Intention to Leave.

Table -8: Correlation: Turnover intentions by met expectations and public image of MLM and job Satisfaction

| Items | Correlation | Significance level |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Met expectations | -0.387 | $p < 01$ |
| Public image of MLM | -0.594 | $p < 01$ |
| Job satisfaction | -0.369 | $p < 01$ |

Source: Survey Data

Based on the data presented, the mean value of met expectations was ranging from 2.83 to 3.50 with standard deviations ranged from 0.54 to 1.94. The level of turnover intentions is high with mean value of 5.67 and standard deviation 1.21 while the level of job satisfaction was moderate with the mean value of 3.83 and standard deviations 2.13.

Met Expectation and Intention to Leave:

A significant and negatively moderate relationship was also reported between met expectations and turnover intentions. Of the correlations calculated, the moderate negative correlation coefficient was found between met expectations and intention to leave ($r = -0.387$ significant at $p < 01$), indicating a particularly moderate negative relationship between these two variables.

This finding is consistent with expectations, that there were moderate and negative correlations between met expectations with turnover intentions. The negative value of the correlation coefficient of the met expectation and intention to quit showed that the higher the level of the met expectation the lower the turnover intentions and vice versa. Findings of the study tend to suggest that met expectations were perceived as the factors that associated with turnover intentions among MLM distributors in Kerala.

Public Image and Intention to Leave:

A significant and negatively moderate relationship was also reported between public image and turnover intentions. Of the correlations calculated, the negative correlation coefficient was found between public image and intention to leave ($r = -0.594$ significant at $p < 01$), indicating a particularly significant negative relationship between these two variables.

This finding is consistent with expectations, that there were moderate and negative correlations between public images of MLM with turnover intentions. The negative value of the correlation coefficient of the public image of MLM and intention to quit showed that the higher the level of the public image the lower the turnover intentions and vice versa. Findings of the study tend to suggest that public image of MLM were perceived as the factors that associated with turnover intentions among MLM distributors in Kerala.

Job Satisfaction and Intention to Leave:

A significant and negatively moderate relationship was also reported between job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Of the correlations calculated, the negative correlation coefficient was found between job satisfaction and intention to leave ($r = -0.3694$ significant at $p < 01$), indicating a particularly significant negative relationship between these two variables.

This finding is consistent with expectations, that there were moderate and negative correlations between job satisfactions with turnover intentions. The negative value of the correlation coefficient of the job satisfaction and intention to quit showed that the higher the level of the job satisfaction the lower the turnover intentions and vice versa. Findings of the study tend to suggest that job satisfaction of MLM were perceived as the factors that associated with turnover intentions among MLM distributors in Kerala.

The results revealed that all of the correlations were in the expected directions indicate significantly and negatively moderate, low, moderate and high magnitude of relationship between independent variables and dependent variable.

This finding is consistent with expectations, that there were significant and negative correlations between met expectations, public image and job satisfaction with turnover intentions. The negative value of the correlation coefficients for all these aspects of the independent variables showed that the higher the level of these variables the lower the turnover intentions and vice versa. The results closely parallel earlier findings (Bline et al., 1991 and Meyer and Allen, 1997) lending some support to the construct validity of these measures. Findings of the study tend to suggest that met expectations, job image and job satisfaction were perceived as the factors that

associated with turnover intentions among MLM distributors in Kerala.

Summary of Findings:

A summary of findings obtained from the analysis of data is given below:

Quick return on investments and huge permanent income are the main offers put before the respondents to motivate them to join as distributors. However, these expectations are not properly met. MLM business transmits only a poor job image among distributors. MLM business provides very little satisfaction to the distributors.

The results of the study showed a positive relationship between the public image of MLM and the level of satisfaction of distributors experience from being part of the industry and the way they feel about the organisation they have chosen to work with. A significant and negatively moderate relationship was also reported between met expectations and turnover intentions. A significant and negatively moderate relationship was also reported between public image and turnover intentions.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher would like to give the following recommendations suggestions to strengthen the MLM business and to avoid its present pitfalls.

- In order to build up a clean and healthy industry image, the government can legalise the business by enacting suitable law in the country to regulate the operation of multilevel marketing companies.
- The MLM companies should be brought under the umbrella of consumer protection legislations.
- The government can impose strict regulations on direct sellers, including an upfront investment and a security deposit to protect consumers.
- Meeting the expectations of new recruit's should be a priority for MLM companies.
- It is necessary to collect information relating to quitting of distributors through exit interviews at various inactivity points to help uncover more accurately the reasons for turnover.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing analysis it is concluded that there is a positive relation between met expectations and job satisfaction in MLM business. The study shows that the expectations of many MLM distributors still remain as a dream and hence they were not satisfied with their present distributorship. Consequently many distributors were seriously thinking of quitting the industry in the near future.

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