

PROMOTION AS A STRATEGIC RESPONSE TOOL AND PERFORMANCE OF MOBILE MONEY AGENTS

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Abstract: Meaningful performance of mobile money agents allow decision makers to judge the results of their business strategies. The nature of competition and survival of the mobile money players, heavily depend on how a mobile money provider employs its strategic response capabilities and variables, to promote performance and gain competitive advantage as they must depend on their agents' delivery at the end of the chain. Continuous promotion of a firms' product creates constant visibility of the company thereby keeping the customer interested in its products. The main aim of the study was to establish the relationship between promotion as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents. It employed a correlational research design. A census was used to select the target population of this study which comprised of 100 Airtel money agents in Kisii town, Kenya. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire which consisted of 5-point Likert type questions. The collected data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings of this study indicate that the agents were performing poorly and therefore made losses despite promotions being done by the main company. It was also found that the promotions being done by Airtel were not effective because promotions were done for other product segments owned by Airtel while the mobile money service segment was left out. The study therefore recommended that more promotions be driven toward promoting the Airtel money service segment in order to improve the performance of the agents' and the general mobile money provider.

Keywords: Promotion, strategic response tool, Mobile Money Agents, Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

While mobile money transfer service started as a payment service performed from a mobile phone, it has evolved into a platform that also includes a wide range of other financial services. This business venture has attracted many mobile phone operators, financial institutions and other service providers. Since the first transaction of mobile money transfer in Kenya by Safaricom's MPesa, in 2007, this service has become ubiquitous. There are more mobile money accounts than bank accounts in nine developing countries mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This adoption has brought about increased challenges in the competitive environment where mobile money agents play a very important role in the actual rendering of the service (Mobile Money GSMA 2014).

Nyamiaka & Osodo (2018) indicate that in this digital era, peer-to-peer payments and purchase of air time purchases account for the majority of mobile money transactions. In the rendering of this service, the role of mobile money agents cannot be underestimated. Agents play a very important role of ensuring customers accessibility of the mobile money service. Mobile money agents in Kenya, make a monthly median profit of (\$60) per month. Across East Africa, Kenyan agents generate the highest number of transactions per agent, but the lowest amount of profits in the region. However, a large proportion of mobile money agents are not active (Helix Institute (2017)). The report further indicates that high dormancy rates can hurt providers' brand and undermine customers' trust in the service, ultimately hampering adoption and usage.

According to ITU-T Technology Watch (2013), mobile money achieved the broadest success in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 16 per cent of adults, reported having used a mobile phone to pay bills or send or receive money by 2013. In Africa, agent tills performing on average less than one transaction per day were unable to break even. Some agents continued to invest in float hoping that the business may take off, or because they value providing a service to the community or being associated with a large financial institution (Helix Institute, 2017).

Strategic Responses:

Pearce and Robinson, (2011) define strategic responses as ways by which organizations react to an external pressure competition. They enable organizations to cope with increased uncertainty and turbulence in the dynamic environment and they include long range planning, new venture development, budgeting and business policy. According to Scalera and Dumitrescu (2012) strategies adopted by mobile money companies to promote their brands are extremely complex, diversified and continually changing. Safaricom chose "send money home" which resonated well with Kenyans as urban employed could send money to the rural folk. Safaricom also used technology innovation for interoperability of services where the M-Pesa brand rides on several banking services to give out loans to the unbanked populations for instance M-shwari which is a product of Commercial Bank of Africa. This greatly enhanced its overall performance.

Johnson, Lee, Saini and Grohmann (2003) posit that for organizations to be successful, they should find ways to appropriately respond to changes that occur especially in the competitive environment. Any firm that does not take actions to align itself with the environment cannot survive in the environment and is soon forced out of the market. Organizations should develop dynamic capabilities and capacity to manage threats and exploit emerging opportunities promptly. These require organizations to put in place strategic responses to maximize the value of the capabilities that ensure optimum organizational performance.

Mobile Agents' Performance:

IFC, Retail Agent Value Proposition (2009), indicate that mobile retail agents' performance is the level of financial gain over a specified period of time which is expressed in terms of financial compensation, value added services and increased customer traffic. Financial gain being the value of transactions performed during a given time. Evaluating the performance of mobile money agents allows decision makers to judge the results of their business strategies and activities in objective monetary terms. These results are reflected in the number of new registering users in the network and continued use of the service.

In any distribution channel, it is essential that the business model works for all parties involved. Agents may choose not to provide the mobile money service if there is inadequate financial compensation. In mobile money transfer, number of transactions determines profitability. In Kenya and other countries, the transaction volume range an agent should achieve to attain baseline success seems to be a minimum of 50 to 60 transactions per day. The entire commission structure, across all mobile money product lines, needs to be considered from the perspective of the mobile money agent (IFC, Retail Agent Value Proposition, 2009).

The nature of competition and survival of the mobile money players, heavily depend on how a mobile money provider employs its strategic response capabilities and variables, to promote performance and gain competitive advantage as they must depend on their agents' delivery at the end of the chain. Airtel money division of Airtel Kenya which originally launched as Zap under the Zain brand in 2009, acquired Zain in 2010 to become one of the two dominant mobile money providers in Kenya. Airtel being the driver of its business performance has since its inception in 2011, been muddled with cutthroat competition and has over time developed strategic responses to counter this competition. One of these strategic responses is promotion of the Airtel money. This study therefore sought to establish the relationship between promotion of mobile money service as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel agents in Kisii Town, Kenya.

Statement of the Problem:

Profitability of the mobile money agents is dependent on the number and value of transactions the agent does because agents are paid a commission at the end of the month based on these numbers. The number of registered users in the network can attract sales growth and therefore very important for the agent. Customers want transaction partners in the network and cash there and then. In this study, the researcher notes that the agents' performance significantly impacts on

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the performance of the provider. The industry competitive environment often has a direct influence on how a firm strategically responds to competition to increase its market position. With a large population registered with Safaricom's M-Pesa and actively using the services, any other mobile money agents can only watch the traffic flow to M-Pesa tills. Industry reports have shown that Airtel's performance pales in comparison with the market leader Safaricom yet it is the second largest mobile operator in Kenya after its main competitor which enjoys 68% market share (Financial Standard dated November 23, 2017).

Much of previous studies on the mobile money transfers concentrate on mobile money adoption. (Alice, 2014) who carried out a study in Nigeria on mobile banking and mobile money adoption for financial inclusion found that M-banking and MMT services were very new and not relevant to the correspondents because MMT service was associated with banks. (Pamela and Eliamani, 2014) also carried out a study on the barriers of the adoption of Airtel money in Tanzania and found that adoption was low due to lack of awareness, value and usability. There is unknown knowledge on which factors of the strategic responses mounted by MNOs significantly contribute to performance of mobile money agents. This study was therefore focused on establishing the relationship between promotion of mobile money use as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents.

Main Objective:

The main objective of the study was to establish the relationship between promotion as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents.

Specific Objectives for the study:

1. To find out the extent to which product discounting as a strategic response tool is related to performance of Airtel money agents?
2. To ascertain the relationship between bundled services as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents?
3. To examine the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents?

Research Questions:

4. What is the relationship between product discounting offering as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents?
5. What is the relationship between bundled services as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents?
6. How is Corporate Social Responsibility as a strategic response tool related to performance of Airtel money agents?

Study Model:

This study was guided by Dynamic Capability Theory. The theory was defined by Teece, Pisano & Shuen (1997) in their paper Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management, as 'the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments'. The theory was adopted for this study as it concurs with (Teece, 2007) who states that competitive advantage in turbulent environments is a function of dynamic capabilities rather than competitive positioning or industry conflict. In mobile money service, technological change is very dynamic and requires strategic actions that are based on specific variables that allow the user to fit the theory to the situation.

Dynamic capabilities are fundamental to the success of companies amidst fierce competition. It can be conceptualized as a strategic process of integrating and combining new market resources that can shape a company (Teece 2009). As mobile money transfer continues to dominate the money transfer industry, it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to better understand why some organizations in the same industry perform better in dynamic environments and why others do not. This research attempted to see how Dynamic Capability theory may help us understand this phenomenon. Mobile Money Transfer (MMT) business is a new industry formed as a result of dynamic technological advancements that keep changing. These dynamic changes in the environment pose considerable challenges for managers (Arend and Bromiley (2009).

Promotion is then viewed as a dynamic capability. Promotions and marketing capabilities are a priority among marketing scholars (Morgan et al., 2009). These capabilities can reflect in a firm's ability to differentiate its products from competitors in order to build successful brands (Murray et al 2012). Scholars have noted that marketing and promotion is relevant to the achievement of higher performance of firms (Protogerou et al 2011).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pamela and Eliamani (2014), sort to find out the criteria used by customers for mobile money service provider selection, the technologies used to support mobile money, customer relationship strategies used throughout the customer life circle for mobile money and the barriers for mobile money adoption where it was found out that the level of adoption is low and there are barriers to its adoption. This study was based in Dar-Es-Salaam whereby the findings were collected through interviews and questionnaires. The sample was selected using simple random sampling where a sample size of 150 customers was involved where each municipality had 50 representatives.

The study concluded that there was low adoption of mobile money in Tanzania. Several service providers were available and what determines the customer's choice of the provider is its agent's availability. Moreover, the study also showed that in order for mobile money services to be adopted, awareness, value and usability was very important. The main factors affecting the adoption were poor provider network and poor user support. Multiple regression results showed a relationship between these variables. Recommendation was that the company should create awareness of their services, make sure it creates value and has usability qualities, increase advertisements and improve agent network and user support. The study is very useful in advancement of knowledge in the mobile money service adoption and will greatly assist the current paper. However, since the study was done in Tanzania, there are several factors that may influence MMT adoption in Kenya that are not in Tanzania.

Alfa (2014) in his study, sort to identify and understand the competitive strategies adopted by Airtel Kenya. A case study research design was adopted. A face to face interview was used to facilitate data collection. The data obtained was analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. The interview respondents were senior, middle level and junior managers drawn from the Finance Marketing Operations and Technical departments of Airtel Kenya. The study found that the competitive strategies employed by the company to counter competition from other mobile network operators include vigorous promotion strategies, cost efficiency, product differentiation and continuous research.

The study further found out that the company's strategic capabilities are found in its human resource, physical infrastructure, and the distribution network. The study recommended that although Airtel has been successful in responding to competition in the telecommunication industry and applying suitable competitive strategies, it should engage more in cost reduction as a response to its competitors' strategies. Besides providing its services and products at lower cost (cost advantage), Airtel should deliver benefits that exceed those of competing products (differentiation advantage) to gain a competitive advantage over the firms. Findings also demonstrated that Airtel is faced with various challenges brought about by stiff competition in the mobile network operator industry. The study had a limitation in selection of sample size. Choice of population and data collection method was right as the researcher was looking at strategies which are usually formulated by management. It fails to give the number of correspondents and therefore in as much as it is very informative, it may not be completely reliable.

Njoroge, Muathe and Bula (2016) investigated the effects of technology on performance of mobile telephone industry in Kenya. The study employed descriptive and explanatory design. The target population consisted of 381 respondents and the sample size was 170 respondents from the four mobile phone companies in Kenya, consisting of top, middle and lower level managers. The research adopted stratified random sampling technique and used mainly primary data which was collected using self-administered questionnaires. Data was analyzed using inferential statistics. Technology was found to be significant in explaining the variation of performance of mobile phone companies.

The study concluded that the performance of the mobile phone companies in Kenya seem to have been stagnated for a period of time despite the availability of better and modern organizational resources. The study sought to determine the extent to which organizational resources affect performance of the mobile phone industry in Kenya and analyze the strengths of the factors of organizational resources on performance. Innovation was also found to be a key requirement as it led to new ideas, products and services, and it enabled complex production processes. The findings showed that if a

company kept on changing the method they used in giving services, performance would improve, hence the reason why the recent technology had strongly influenced performance. The study found out that technology was statistically significant in affecting the firm's performance; therefore, the research concluded that technology is an important resource in influencing companies' performance. Mobile phone companies should therefore keep updating their technological performance. The study recommended that the management of mobile phone companies ensure that they provide sufficient services to their customers since they directly influence performance. In other words, the management ought to pay a lot of attention to technological changes. This study was very relevant and informative but the current paper will be able to broaden the spectrum to include innovativeness, promotion and training as indicators of performance.

Senso and Venkatakrishnan (2013) examined challenges of mobile money transfer services' market penetration and expansion in Singida District in Tanzania. The study adopted cross-sectional survey to collect quantitative data from users of mobile money services. The study included agents and service providers' representatives from Airtel Money, Tigo-Pesa and Vodacom M-Pesa in Singida district, Tanzania. Data was collected from 132 customers, seven agents, and three mobile-phone service providing company officials. Stratified random sampling procedure was employed. Structured questionnaires were used as a tool for data collection from the customers of mobile phone money transfer services and interview guide was used as tool when conducting an interview for agents.

Findings indicate that, agents and customers faced challenges when operating mobile phone money transfer services. These challenges included network failure in terms of network outage and frequent hanging transactions, technical questions from customers were beyond agents' ability to explain. Presence of many agents in the same locality led to a scramble for a few customers among the agents. Fraud was noted as security risk, transactional charges were high, network coverage was limited in the rural areas and there was limited information on their applications (Senso and Venkatakrishnan, 2013).

The study recommended that mobile phone companies should adopt effective network infrastructures in rural areas so as to extend network coverage and hence increase rural connectivity. It further recommended that service reliability be improved to increase customer trust and transactions cost reduced. Further, agents of service providers needed to be motivated by extending to them low interest loans. Numbers of agents in any locality need to be balanced to avoid customer scramble and low commissions.

Muisyo, Alala and Musiega (2014) carried out a study on the effects of mobile money services on the performance of the banking Institutions. The study examined how various mobile money services transactions impact on performance, the effect of accessibility, efficiency and proficiency of mobile money services on the performance of banking institutions. A sample of 115 respondents was used to gather data from 13 financial Institutions in Kakamega town. Data was collected through questionnaires and both structured and semi structured interviews were done. Data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Findings indicate that introduction of mobile money services has contributed positively to the financial performance of the banking institutions. Convenience and reliability of various mobile money services has largely led to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty despite occasional technical hitches that prove disappointing to the customers.

Kimotho (2013) sort to establish the strategic response of commercial banks in Kenya to the introduction of mobile money transfer services. Descriptive cross-sectional research design was adopted. The population of study consisted of all the 43 commercial banks that were registered with Central Bank of Kenya by 2013. The study collected primary data from the managers of the commercial banks using semi-structured questionnaires. The respondents included senior and middle level managers who make strategic decisions in these commercial banks. The questionnaires were administered using the drop-and-pick method. The study found out that most commercial banks had increased their budgets to counter competition from mobile money transfer services. The study concluded that most of the commercial banks had adopted strategies to mitigate the competition posed by mobile money transfer services. These included adopting new technologies such as mobile banking through collaborating with mobile/telecommunication companies in effecting these services; online/internet banking and more introduction of plastic money through credit cards. The study recommended that commercial banks in Kenya must be in tune with the external environment, adopt strategies such as forming strategic alliance with other financial services providers and employ human resource strategies as lack of skilled man power was established as a major factor that hinders innovativeness.

Elung'ata (2014) who studied response strategies adopted by mobile phone companies in Kenya to changes in the telecommunication industry sort to determine the changes in the telecommunication industry that have affected firms within the industry and to establish the response strategies adapted to these changes in the industry. A total of 17 out of the expected 20 correspondents completed the questionnaires representing 85% of the target. The study found out that the mobile money companies had been in operation for a longer duration of time and therefore understand the dynamics of the telecommunication industry and the responses that should be adopted by the operators in order to be competitive. The ownership of the companies comprised of both local and foreign companies.

The study recommendations on managerial policy and practice on managers is that they should adopt comprehensive staff development policies. Not only should they know the company's products and services but also every other aspect of the organization. This will enable them to contribute effectively to customer satisfaction, necessary for any company's survival. And the management of the companies should inculcate a practice of continuous review of the state of competition in the industry so that they do not simply react to the challenges as they arise to avoid panic situation which will lead to adoption of strategies that will hamper the company's ability to realize its desired objectives. The study was based on responses to the external environment while the current study will assess strategic responses and agents' performance. The study recommendation was very prescriptive based on environmental factors.

Onguko and Ragui (2012) undertook a study to determine the role of strategic positioning on products performance in the telecommunications industry in Kenya. Descriptive research design was used where the target population comprised of the 403, staff working in the headquarters of telecommunication companies in Kenya. Stratified random sampling method was used to select 30% of the respondents. Primary data was collected using semi-structured questionnaires. Content analysis was used in the processing of qualitative data.

The study found that combining strategic resources influenced products performance in the telecommunication industry in Kenya most, followed by multiple products, research and development and firms' marketing strategy. The study also established that combining of resources with other organizations helped in the market penetration of a product and hence recommended that telecommunication companies form more strategic alliances. The study also established that marketing strategies influence products performance in the telecommunication industry and hence recommended that telecommunication companies intensify their marketing strategies and advertisements so as to improve their products performance. The study also revealed that multiple products influence products performance in telecommunication companies. The above findings and recommendations give insights into product performance but fail to point out other aspects that determine whether a firm is performing well. Besides, this was a general assumption and not firm specific. The study is not generalizable to all telecommunications companies in the industry because other firms have competitive advantage over others and therefore perform better.

Knowledge Gap:

The research gap identified is that despite the richness of information on adoption of mobile money service, there is scarcity of evidence on the relationship between promotion as a strategic response tool and performance of mobile money agents' performance.

Study Paper Model:

The model has two constituent parts; the independent variables and dependent variables are explained below.

Independent Variables: The first section of the constituent part of the model constitutes the independent variable which includes bundled services, product discounting and Corporate Social Responsibility. These were found to enhance the number of transactions done by the agents.

Dependent Variable: The dependent variable explains the end results of the independent variable. Its components include increase in number of transactions and continued used of the service. They are the end result of promotions done.

Conceptual Framework:

Kombo and Tromp (2006) state that a conceptual framework is a research tool intended to assist a researcher to develop awareness and understanding of the situation under scrutiny and to communicate it. The conceptual framework used for

this research draws upon theoretical concepts of strategy and performance and is used to link the relationships between strategic responses and performance of money agents. Based on the research questions of the study, the conceptual model was developed. Promotion was adopted as an independent strategic response variable while the dependent variable performance was tested in terms of the number of transactions.

Figure 1.1 below depicts the strategic responses as the independent variables and performance as dependent variables of the study.

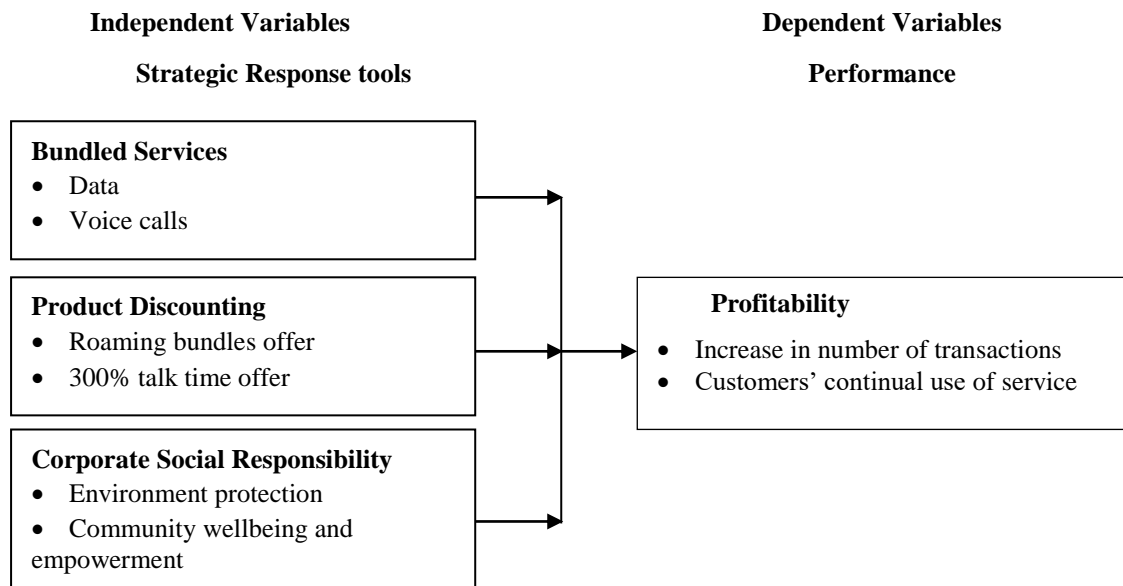


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Source: Researcher (2018)

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was undertaken in Kisii town, Kenya between January and April 2018. The aim of the study was to establish the relationship between promotion as a strategic response tool and performance of Airtel money agents. It employed a correlational research design. The correlational research design was appropriate because it tries to measure the relationships among variables without manipulation during the research processes (Polit & Hungler, 2013). A census was used to select the target population of this study which comprised of all the 100 Airtel money agents in Kisii town. Kisii town is in Kisii County which is one of the 47 Kenyan counties located on the western part of Kenya.

The researcher collected primary data using a structured questionnaire which consisted of 5-point Likert type questions. Five alternatives were offered: strongly agree, agree, uncertain, disagree or strongly disagree.

4. DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data for the study was collected and analyzed using (SPSS) software package where findings were raised and conclusions drawn.

Findings:

In this section, we present the results that emerged from the study and discuss the findings. The results showed an average weighted mean of 3.2, implying that there was a significant relationship between promotion and performance of the money agents. Specifically, it was evident from the study that respondents agreed that promotion done through bundled services and discounts (weighted means 3.38 and 3.28 respectively on a five-point Likert scale) were related to performance while the respondents were undecided whether corporate social responsibility was related to performance (weight 2.94). The results arising from the questionnaire are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Promotion as a strategic response tool and Performance of Airtel Money agents

	Strongly agree (5)	Agree (4)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)	m	std
Bundled services e.g. Unliminet	19	21	19	9	10	3.38	3.50
Discounts	17	21	18	11	11	3.28	3.51
Corporate Social Responsibility	15	18	9	19	17	2.94	3.56
Mean						3.2	3.52

The study sought to establish the weekly number of transactions that had been done by the respondents in the three months (October, November and December) before the month in which the survey was done. Table 26 shows the results obtained.

Table 2: Number of Transactions

No. of Transactions	OCTOBER 2017		NOVEMBER 2017		DECEMBER 2017	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
241-280	1	1.28%	0	0.00%	1	1.28%
201-240	4	5.13%	4	5.13%	4	5.13%
161-200	1	1.28%	2	2.56%	0	0.00%
121-160	3	3.85%	3	3.85%	4	5.13%
81-120	11	14.10%	12	15.38%	16	20.51%
41-80	20	25.64%	19	24.36%	23	29.49%
1-40	38	48.72%	38	48.72%	30	38.46%
Total	78	100.00%	78	100.00%	78	100.00%

Table 2 shows that 48.7% of respondents did at most 40 transactions per week. This was followed by 25.6% of the respondents who did between 41-80 transactions per week. In the month of November, 48.7% of the respondents carried out at most 40 transactions while 24.4% of the respondents carried out between 41-80 transactions per week. In December, most of the respondents (67.95%) of the respondents carried out at most 80 transactions per week. This shows that most of the Airtel agents were performing an average of 11 transactions per day.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the respondents were performing poorly and therefore made losses despite promotions being done by the main company. It was also found that the promotions being done by Airtel were not effective for promoting the mobile money segment because promotions were done for other product segments owned by Airtel like bundled services, product discounting and corporate social responsibility.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, the study recommends that more promotions be driven toward promoting the Airtel money service in order to improve the agents' performance.

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