

**THE USE OF BROKER CALLS AS DEVOTIONAL /PRAYER HOT-LINES
FOR MEMBERS OF CONGREGATION OF THE CHRIST APOSTOLIC
CHURCH (C.A.C, CANAANLAND), ILE-IFE, OSUN STATE OF NIGERIA**

BY

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Abstract

Novel opportunities proposed by the telecommunication industry are being adopted by some religious groups in Nigeria to stay connected to their members. Religious organisations, particularly churches keyed into this new regime through the use of Broker Calls to offer prayer/devotional hot-lines, as a way of connecting to members of their congregation on daily basis. Broker Calls utilises the existing telecom infrastructure to reach out to members of the congregation at any point in time. The intention of this research, therefore, is to carry out a study on how the Broker Calls works and to further investigate its interest and implications for the Habitel project.

Introduction

The Telecommunication industry is perhaps one of the fastest growing sectors in the world. The industry has contributed well over 35% to the world's economy and has continued to maintain a steady rise in the past one decade (Ekeh, 2013). The reason is not far-fetched. The industry has remained the most dynamic and potent force in the current globalisation regime. In terms of space and time compression, telecommunication has, indeed, contributed more than any other sectors. In Nigeria, the telecom industry is only second to the Oil and Gas sector in the sense that over 75 million Nigerians are users of one telecom provider or the other. This has created incentives for telecom experts and service providers to invent and introduce various options that will meet the daily needs of the teeming population. In this respect, services such as Family and Friends, Congregational Network, Please Call me Back, Islamic calls or Voice Tone among several others have been introduced at one time or the other.

One recent development, which is of interest to this study, is the introduction of what has been termed 'BROKER CALLS'. This is used by religious organisations to make use of new opportunities offered by the telecom providers to reach out to believers. Nigerians are known to be very religious people and their religious leaders are taken as next to God (Maier, 2000). Anything that will contribute to their spiritual rejuvenation is, as such taken seriously. Broker calls is one of such new inventions that is making waves in churches today. It is essentially a daily broadcast, which is used to give prophetic prayers to members of a congregation over a period of time. A particular church- Christ Apostolic Church (CAC, Canaan-land) at Ile-Ife in Osun State of Nigeria is one of the users of this service. What is this Broker Calls all about? What are its common features? How does it work and in what ways does it fit into the Habitel project? These are the pertinent questions that this field work intends to provide answers. But before then, the next section of the study shall address some methodological issues.

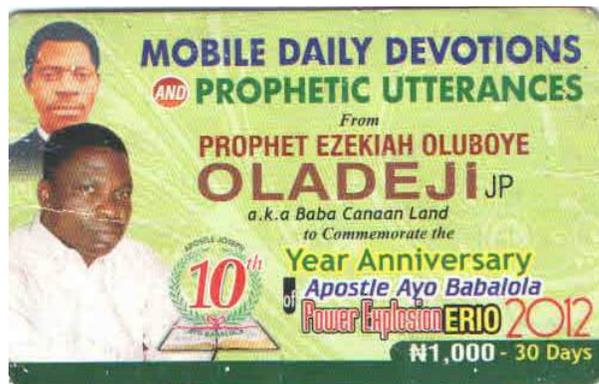
Methodology

Both primary and secondary data collections were adopted for this study. The primary data was collected from some members of the congregation of the church. In all, 5 members of the congregation were interviewed to find out how the service works. The researcher interviewed three members of the church at Ile-Ife and contacted the two other respondents on the phone. One of the respondents is a Personal Assistant to leader of the congregation. The secondary data was essentially collected through the use of scholarly materials from the internet, newspaper reports and published articles. The data from the two sources was content analysed.

How the Broker Call Works

The idea of the broker calls was said to have been muted by a member of the Christ Apostolic Church, Ile-Ife, who incidentally is also a staff in one of the Telecom service providers in Nigeria (MTN). According to one of my interviewees, the staff uses it as part of the marketing strategy of their company since it is expected to bring multiple returns. By early 2012, the idea was brought to the knowledge of the leaders of the church and they agreed to adopt the service for three reasons. First, it was reasoned that it would serve as a means of connecting to members of the congregation on a daily basis irrespective of where they are in Nigeria. Two, it would increase the faith and further boost the spiritual life of members where ever they find themselves in any part Nigeria. Finally, it was considered as a veritable means of raising fund for the church. These three factors were considered as contributory and in line with the overall vision of the church.

The modality for kick-starting the programme was agreed upon by both the service provider and the church leaders. Members of the congregation, who intent to participate in the scheme are required to purchase a scratch card. The cards are of two types depending on the financial strength of the prospective subscribers. The lower denomination cost Five Hundred Naira (N500, approximately 2.5 Euros), while the higher one is sold for One Thousand Naira (N1000, that is, 5 Euros). The former lasts the user for fifteen days (2 weeks), while the latter has an expiring period of 30 days. Certain percentage is usually paid to the leader of the church from the number of cards sold to members of the church. The scratch-cards are labelled 'MOBILE DAILY DEVOTIONS AND PROPHETIC UTTERANCES'. It bears the picture of the Church leader and that of Prophet Ayo Babalola (the founder of the Christ Apostolic Church worldwide who died some fifty years ago at the age of 38). On the other side of the each card, there are a serial Number, a Batch Number and a Scratch Code number, beside which an instruction reads 'Scratch Gently'. On the upper part of the scratch code number is 'Call the Activation Number and Follow the Voice' which in essence, is an instruction or a guide on how to activate the network.



According to Pastor Kola, one of the respondents, the recordings to be broadcast to members on the network are changed every month. The MTN staff comes to the church at a particular period of the month to record the various samples of the church leader's prophetic messages numbering to about 60. Each message lasts for about 30 seconds. The 30 best samples are then selected from such messages to be broadcast. Those who are on the network receive a call daily to listen to the broadcast. However, if a member of the network misses the call in the morning, the call will be repeated in the afternoon and in the evening if the person misses the afternoon slot. But once a subscriber picks the call, he or she exhausts the slot for the day. In other words, the phone can ring three times (that is morning, afternoon and evening) a day but once the subscriber picks up the call in any of those periods, the Broker call does not come in for the rest of the day. Different versions of the prophetic utterance are broadcast on each day. One of the respondents informed the researcher that the Broker call is strictly a MTN affair. But Pastor Kola insisted that any of the telecom service providers that are operational in Nigeria can use the service.

Broker Calls Patronage

The first time the network was introduced in March 2012, only the N500 denomination of the Mobile Daily Devotional hotlines existed. But as patronage increased, the vendor decided to introduce the N1000 denomination. Those who could not afford to buy got the benevolence of fellow worshippers who bought extra copies as gift for them. In fact, Pastor Kola informed the researcher that a particular subscriber purchased as much as fifty copies, from which he was given one copy. The church programme where the cards are usually sold holds fortnightly. Worshippers come from various parts of the world, including the US, UK, South Africa and other African countries to participate in the programme. These foreign worshippers also buy the scratch cards for their use while in Nigeria and also give to their families and friends who are resident in Nigeria. Pastor Kola told the researcher that the sale of the scratch-cards on each programme could not be less than 5000. In a nutshell, the introduction of the Broker calls is a huge success in the church under study.

Interest for Habitel

This particular case study is a communication tool that works with mobile phones with existing lines. Broker calls fits into habitel project in the sense that it conforms with the clientele and parentele applications. Broker calls connect worshippers and their pastors together on a daily basis to receive spiritual blessings and rejuvenation. It, therefore, eases the stress of having to convoke special prayer meetings or anointing service within the church premises on a more

regular basis. Of course, there is a business aspect to it. Subscribers have to pay a paltry sum of N500.00 or N1000 as the case may be in order to continue to enjoy the service. Certainly remittances are necessarily made on a regularly basis to the church by the service provider (MTN) for it to continue to enjoy such service. Furthermore, broker call requires subscribers to supply certain personal data like names, existing mobile lines and occupation. Various adult classes of people including students, artisans, teachers and market men/women who use mobile phones can hook up to this network.

Current Challenges.

There is no doubting the fact that the introduction of Broker Calls is currently a victim of its own success at the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), where it has gained a serious acceptance among worshippers. One of my respondents informed the researcher that the vendor of the Broker Calls recently demanded a large sum of money (Between 12 to 15 million naira) from the church leader for the programme to continue. The sum was negotiated to an undisclosed amount and the church was about to pay the first instalment of the agreed sum of money when some influential members of the church kicked against it. They argued that the vendor should rather increase the subventions or the percentage of money that it accruing to the church rather than demanding for such additional amount of money. It is now being speculated that the programme may suffer a serious setback and eventually stopped if an agreement is not reached on the issues.

Conclusion

Broker Calls is one of the most recent developments in the use of mobile devices in Nigeria. The network is mainly used among Christian faithful of a particular church that use it to offer daily prayers or spiritual blessings to members. It makes use of the existing telecom infrastructure; hence it works with various service providers in Nigeria. This makes more people to subscribe to the network. Broker Calls is useful to the Habitel project because it uses both the *clientele* and the *parentele* applications. The network enables members of the congregation to be in a constant touch with their spiritual leader. For this to be activated, certain personal data of the subscribers are required. Furthermore, the scratch-card, which prospective users must purchase, has a serial number, a batch number and a scratch-code number that are peculiar to it. With these important characteristics, Broker Calls is no doubt, a unique contribution to the Habitel project.

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