

2018

Strategies for Building and Retaining a Productive Multilevel Marketing Downline

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Ranelli Williams

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2018

Abstract

Strategies for Building and Retaining a Productive Multilevel Marketing Downline

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2018

Abstract

Most multilevel marketers lose money and quit within the first year of operations because of a lack of effective strategies for building and retaining a productive downline. The purpose of this multiple case study was to apply Cantillon's entrepreneurship theory to explore strategies used by 3 multilevel marketers from 3 different multilevel marketing companies with operations based in New York. Participant selection was purposeful and based on the number of years the participants had been in multilevel marketing and their generated income. Data collection occurred through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions of the participants and a review of company training documents and videos. Data from the interviews and training were examined, and key ideas were documented and analyzed using a 6-step data analysis process, including listing and grouping the collected data, considering all data before reducing or eliminating any, grouping the data by research questions, formulating the data into themes, documenting the experience, and presenting the data findings. Three themes emerged from the data: entrepreneurial mindset, strong leadership and support, and training and development. Adopting strategies described in this study may contribute to social change by increasing the success rate among multilevel marketers, thus reducing unemployment, resulting in more taxable income and increased tax revenue, and producing a positive effect on the economy in New York area.

Dedication

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. ~ Hebrews 6:11 (New International Version)

First, I want to dedicate this study to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without whom this would not be possible. I give God all the honor and praise for giving me the strength to push through to the very end so that this dream could be realized. Second, I want to thank my amazing husband, Eric who sacrificed so much so that I can achieve this dream of becoming a doctor. I am so grateful that you did not give up on me even when I was ready to give up on myself. Thank you for your support. Third, my sons, Joeraan and Jaevaan, you are indeed my inspiration. It is because of you that I pushed through. This accomplishment is to show you what is possible when you persevere through obstacles. The Bible says in Galatians 6:9 (New International Version), “*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*” Never give up, my sons. Even when things get tough, continue to persist until you reach your goals. Last, I thank my mom and dad and all my family and friends who provided words of encouragement that motivated me to push through to the end of this journey.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my committee members, Dr. Timothy Malone, Dr. Kevin Davies, and Dr. Charles Needham, for providing me feedback and guiding me through this process. To my study buddies and colleagues, especially Victor Olufemi, Rochelle Jordan, and Dr. Marsha Hopwood, your support and accountability were unprecedented, and I am eternally grateful that we connected on this journey and were able to guide and motivate each other along the way. To everyone else who encouraged and lifted me up in prayer, I appreciate you. This experience opened my eyes to blessings that are possible when you believe, walk boldly in faith, and not give up.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small business operations, including multilevel marketing, provide an alternative career path and income means to traditional employment. Despite the rapid growth and boost to the economy, small business owners, who include multilevel marketers, face many challenges that contribute to high turnover and failure within the first 5 years of operations. In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the key strategies that contribute to multilevel marketers building and retaining a productive downline within the first 5 years of operations.

Background of the Problem

The multilevel marketing industry, a part of the direct sales industry, is a multibillion-dollar industry worldwide (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Neațu & Imbrișcă, 2016). Multilevel marketing is a marketing strategy in which compensation to the sales force is not only for the personal sales they generate, but also for the sales of the other salespeople that they recruit (Košnarová, 2013). This recruited salesperson, referred to as the participant's "downline," can provide multiple levels of compensation as the team expands (Košnarová, 2013; Wells, 2013). In 2014, the global direct sales revenue was \$183 billion, with 19% of the market share from the United States (Neațu & Imbrișcă, 2016). Over 70 million people in the United States participated as multilevel marketers with over 94% losing money and 97% quitting within the first year of operations (Bosley & McKeage, 2015). Despite these statistics, few researchers addressed the retention rate problem in the industry.

Approximately 50% of small business owners fail to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years, according to a report from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA, 2016). Small business failures continue to contribute to the decline in the U.S. economy (SBA, 2016). In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the strategies needed by multilevel marketers to successfully build and retain a productive downline within the first 5 years of operations. The results may help new and aspiring multilevel marketers by providing them with practical insight into the proven strategies for multilevel marketing success.

Problem Statement

Multilevel marketing is one of the fastest growing industries in the United States; however, the majority of multilevel distributors are not able to recoup their investment (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). Furthermore, 94% of business individuals engaged in multilevel marketing lose money and 97% cease operations (Bosley & McKeage, 2015). The general business problem was that a high number of multilevel marketers do not remain in business during the first 5 years of operations. The specific business problem was that some multilevel marketers lack strategies to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. The targeted population consisted of three multilevel marketers from three separate companies in New York, whom I selected because they implemented

strategies to achieve success during the first 5 years of operations and earning a six-figure income for at least 2 of those 5 years. The implication for positive social change is the potential to provide success strategies to current and aspiring multilevel marketers, which may result in more income generating opportunities for those who choose that path. In addition, consumers may potentially have more choices of products and services, which will provide other possible benefits to the community associated with supply and demand, such as lower prices or increased benefits. Data from this study may be relevant to decisions on economic expansion of multilevel marketers, which may have a concurrent positive effect on the economy in New York.

Nature of the Study

The three types of research methodologies are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method (Murphy et al., 2014). Researchers use a quantitative method for measurement, generalization, replication, and causality and when they need to test a hypothesis using numerical data and analysis (Bryman, 2015; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). A quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study because the objective was not to test hypotheses. When the qualitative and quantitative methods are insufficient to answer a research question, Murphy et al. (2014) indicated that the researcher then combines both approaches to result in a mixed-method study. A mixed-method approach was also not applicable to this study because of the already established inappropriateness of the quantitative method. Murphy et al. (2014) posited that when researchers want an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, they use qualitative methods to gather the insights of participants about the problem. The qualitative method best aligned with the

purpose of exploring strategies that some multilevel marketers located in New York used to sustain their businesses by building and retaining a productive downline.

Phenomenology, ethnography, and case studies are qualitative research designs (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015). Phenomenological research involves purposefully selecting participants and identifying and gathering their lived experiences to explore a unique event or phenomenon (Gill, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Considering that the study was not about exploring the lived experiences of the participants, phenomenology was not a design suited to answering the central research question. Case, Todd, and Kral (2014) indicated that in an ethnographic research design, the researcher is a participant observer and obtains detailed evidence about the culture from people within that culture. An ethnographic design was not appropriate for this study because the research purpose was not to examine rules and norms of people interacting within a culture, but rather on gaining an in-depth understanding of success strategies of multilevel marketers from multiple sources. The appropriateness of the qualitative case study design chosen for this study existed in its scope, which encompassed real life scenarios for gaining insight into the perspective of individuals. Bristowe, Selman, and Murtagh (2015), Cairney and Denny (2015), and Yin (2014) noted that the qualitative case study design provides rich information about business strategy over time and allows the researcher to investigate new concepts, discover new insights, , and obtain a rich description of a phenomenon under study. Exploring multilevel marketers' success strategies in various companies provided insight to the strategic success elements implemented by these multilevel

marketers to build and retain a productive downline and sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Research Question

The central research question for this study was the following: What strategies do some multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations?

Interview Questions

I used the following open-ended interview questions for this qualitative case study to gain insight from successful multilevel marketers in New York.

1. How does having a downline contribute to the success of your multilevel marketing business?
2. What are the characteristics of a multilevel marketer who successfully builds a productive downline?
3. How do you evaluate the potential success of new prospects to your downline?
4. How do you identify potential multilevel marketers for your downline and what recruitment strategies are you using to recruit them?
5. What communication strategies do you employ with potential and current multilevel marketers in your downline?
6. What barriers did you encounter as you recruited new multilevel marketers for your downline?

7. What training do you provide to new and existing multilevel marketers in your downline?
8. What causes new multilevel marketers to become unsuccessful?
9. How are you able to motivate multilevel marketers to continue with your downline?
10. What additional comments might you offer regarding creating a productive downline?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework serves as a lens for understanding the context of the problem explored (Green, 2014). The entrepreneurship theory was the conceptual framework guiding this study. Hébert and Link (1989) recognized Cantillon as the originator of the entrepreneurship theory, dating back to the early 18th century.

Cantillon (1755/2015) associated the entrepreneur with exercising good judgment and innovativeness under conditions of uncertainties for profitability and sustainability. Business owners need to exhibit certain character traits and attributes to attain certain desired results (Antonio, Lanawati, Wiriana, & Christina, 2014). With the entrepreneurship theory, Cantillon presented the qualities of good judgment and innovativeness as being relevant to achieving profitability and sustainability regardless of uncertainties. Cantillon considered that uncertainty is inevitable in the marketplace. Hence, given that uncertainties exist in different spheres of business, becoming a successful entrepreneur in a multilevel marketing industry requires adopting proven strategies and processes. The entrepreneurship theory, therefore, aligned well with

exploring success strategies for multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline and achieve sustainability in their businesses.

Operational Definitions

The following definitions may aid the reader in understanding certain terms and phrases mentioned throughout this study.

Business success: For purposes of this study, business success refers to businesses that have sustained their operations for more than 5 years (SBA, 2016).

Direct selling: Direct selling is the sale of products and services by independent contractors or distributors not in a retail location but rather face-to-face (Wells, 2013).

Downline: Downline are members of a distributor's sales team, recruited and coached by the distributor or another member of the distributor's team (Košnarová, 2013; Tyre, 2015).

Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurship is the problem-solving activity and attributes exhibited by a business owner that drive innovation and job creation, and includes risks and uncertainties (Aslan, Duman, Sen, Duran, & Atarbay, 2016; Ruiz, Soriano, & Coduras, 2016).

Multilevel marketing (MLM): MLM, also referred to as network marketing, is a type of business structure and marketing strategy where each distributor (business owner) recruits a network of distributors (downline) who are compensated not only for their own personal sales but also on the sales of their downline (Košnarová, 2013). Consequently, there are multiple levels of compensation as the distributor builds a team (Košnarová, 2013; Wells, 2013).

Productive downline: Productive downline refers to members of a multilevel marketer's team who are actively recruiting additional team members as well as selling goods and services (Kong, 2002).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are unverified facts considered true and the researcher must consider assumptions to avoid invalidating the results of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). According to Lips-Wiersma and Mills (2014), the researcher must identify and evaluate assumptions in relation to the research question in order to mitigate misrepresentation about the study. This study contains five evident assumptions. The first assumption was that the participants prove honest about meeting the established criteria relating to their sustainability. The second assumption was that the participants prove truthful in their answers to the interview questions. The third assumption was that using participants from only three companies in New York would provide good data and insight to address the business problem. The fourth assumption was that the qualitative research method was the best choice for this study. The fifth assumption was that the results of the study may contribute to social change in providing key success factors to aspiring multilevel marketers as well as increase the sustainability of multilevel marketing companies.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses and conditions associated with the study that the researcher cannot control and might restrict the study and affect its results (Bouzon, Augusto, & Manuel, 2014; Horga, Kaur, & Peterson (2014). The first limitation was that

the number of multilevel marketing distributors who built and retained a productive downline may appear small because of the high rate of attrition. Second, other multilevel marketers from companies within and outside New York were not included in the research because of time and limited resources and may have characteristics or peculiarities relevant to the study. Hence, the findings may not be transferable across multilevel marketers in all areas. Third, although one of the assumptions of the study was that participants are truthful in their responses to interview questions, participants may not have been as honest and authentic in answering all interview questions, which could affect the validity of the study findings.

Delimitations

Ody-Brasier and Vermeulen (2014) indicated that delimitations refer to the bounds imposed by the researcher to focus the scope of the study. The boundaries I set for this research limited the scope to three distributors in three multilevel marketing companies in New York and so I did not include distributors outside this area. In addition, the research question only addressed multilevel marketers who have successfully built a productive downline, who were the only ones interviewed and therefore, the research populations did not include those who dropped out or failed. One final delimitation was that I only included distributors who have been in business for more than 5 years.

Significance of the Study

The focus of this study was on success strategies employed by multilevel marketers in New York. However, data collected in the process may appear relevant to

the larger multilevel marketing industry. Combining previous research and the conceptual framework with the results of the study provided insights to aspiring multilevel marketers to achieve sustainability in their businesses.

Contribution to Business Practice

With unemployment in the United States rising to as high as 10% in 2010 and remaining at about 5% in 2015 (Nichols, Schmidt, & Sevak, 2017), business ownership is a viable means to individual and economic sustainability. However, many individuals are not able to afford the astronomical costs of starting a traditional business with the start-up costs of the top 10 franchises ranging from \$37K to \$2.2M (Entrepreneur, 2017). The multilevel marketing industry is a rapidly growing multibillion-dollar industry with annual direct sales in the United States capturing 19% of the \$183 billion global market share (Neațu & Imbrișcă, 2016). Data from this study provided strategies used by business leaders in building and retaining a productive downline and achieving success as a multilevel marketer. The data may not only benefit the individual distributors, but also the companies they represent, the reputation of the industry, and the local economy.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may become an addition to the body of existing literature on running a successful multilevel marketing business beyond the first 5 years. With this new body of knowledge, by implication, sustainable multilevel marketing businesses may result in increased revenue, while New York employees in the industry are able to retain their jobs. Newer employment opportunities may become available and a reduced incidence of unemployment could result in more taxable income, with a concurrent

increase in tax revenue for the provision of public infrastructures. Beyond the opportunities to make money, successful multilevel marketing activities may afford residents in New York the opportunity to build self-esteem, make friends, and foster the development of entrepreneurial skills.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I reviewed the literature to explore existing knowledge on strategies that multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. To ensure rigor, the review of literature contains a critical analysis and synthesis of scholarly seminal books, articles, reports, and peer-reviewed journals covering various constructs related to the entrepreneurial theory by Cantillon (1755/2015). The resources that I reviewed were relevant to answering the central research question. Key constructs researched were good judgment, innovation, profitability, sustainability, uncertainties, character traits, and attributes. An aspect of discussions included in this review is an evaluation of the role of multilevel marketing in small business economics, and strategies used to successfully recruit, train, motivate, and retain a downline salesforce. The review contains comparisons and contrasts of findings reported about the multilevel marketing industry. I synthesized and performed critical analysis on the data to answer the central research question of what strategies are available to multilevel marketers for building and retaining a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations.

Organization of the Review of Literature

I organized the review of literature into segments under eight subheadings and provided a separate conclusion to the literature review. The first of the discussions was on entrepreneurship theory, an extensive synthesis, and analysis of the conceptual viewing lens of this study. The next was on multilevel marketing as a form of entrepreneurship, followed by a discussion on multilevel marketing as an alternative to traditional marketing. Thereafter, I provided synthesis and critical analysis of sources on why people join direct selling companies. The fifth discussion was on turnover in direct selling companies, while the sixth relates to perceived multilevel marketing failure factors. The last two discussions were on perceived multilevel marketing success factors and the effects of innovation in multilevel marketing. The search strategy adopted was key to identifying the relevant sources to perform the analysis for this doctoral study.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden's online library to search for relevant scholarly seminal books, reports, and peer-reviewed journals. I accessed relevant research studies from the following databases: ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, EBSCO, Emerald Management, ProQuest Central, SAGE Premier, and Science Direct. In addition, I used Google Scholar and focused on current articles from 2014 to 2018 in selecting literature to review. My search strategy included using keywords related to the conceptual viewing lens such as *entrepreneurship*, *entrepreneurship theory*, *marketing innovations*, *profitability*, *sustainability*, *entrepreneurial uncertainties*, *entrepreneurial judgment*, and *traits and characteristics*. For the research industry, I searched for

multilevel marketing, downlines, direct selling, direct sales, marketing methods, relationship marketing, network marketing, small business strategy, word of mouth marketing, lack of cash flow, and turnover in direct sales. I also used other keywords such as *success in business, success in direct sales, small business success, small business failure, small business survival rates,* and different combinations of the keywords.

This review consists of 202 references from scholarly journals, books, and government websites, organized by topic. Eighty-five percent of the articles were peer-reviewed, and 86% receive publication in the past 5 years. The review of the professional and academic literature section contains 87 references, 74 of which are peer-reviewed.

Entrepreneurship Theory

The entrepreneurship theory by Cantillon was the conceptual framework for this study. In the work, *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* (Essay on the Nature of Trade in General), Cantillon (1755/2015) associated the entrepreneur with exercising good judgment and innovativeness under conditions of uncertainties for profitability and sustainability. Hébert and Link (1989) and Vivarelli (2013), authors in the 20th and 21st century, reflect Cantillon's 18th-century perception about an entrepreneur in their work. Hébert and Link (1989) defined the entrepreneur as an individual with the responsibility for making judgmental decisions in relation to resources, the form, location, and use of goods, and stakeholder institutions. Vivarelli (2013), assuming a microeconomic viewpoint, concluded that entrepreneurship was multifaceted and continuously evolving by innovation. Omer Attali and Yemini (2017) suggested that entrepreneurship involves

innovation, opportunity seeking and exploitation, and the establishment of organizations for financial gain.

The constructs evident in Cantillon's theory are business uncertainty, human judgment, innovation, profitability, and sustainability. Uncertainty occurs when the probability of the future outcome of activities is unpredictable (Basile & Girardi, 2018). Business managers need to embrace uncertainty as an opportunity to exercise critical thinking and make quick and effective decisions (Basile & Girardi, 2018). Cantillon (1755/2015) considered that uncertainty was an integral part of marketplace activities, which entrepreneurs cannot but face. The entrepreneur, therefore, conceptualizes the business idea from opportunities, coordinates required resources - human and otherwise, and bears the possible risk of failure. These factors drive the entrepreneur, notwithstanding the uncertainty and risk inherent in exploring opportunities.

Profitability drives the entrepreneur's activities despite the uncertain environment (Cantillon, 1755/2015). Cantillon's view about profitability being the driving force for entrepreneurial activities is consistent with the position of Schumpeter (1934) in his work *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*. Schumpeter (1934) considered that profit is the reward of the entrepreneur for successfully translating new ideas into creative and innovative product and services. The entrepreneur can produce an economic profit by identifying and taking advantage of unexploited markets (Vranceanu, 2014). Unfortunately, along the line of Cantillon's entrepreneurship theory, despite being the motivation for entrepreneurship, profitability does not guarantee business success or sustainability in the long term. The

entrepreneur, according to Cantillon's theory, may require making human judgments given prevailing issues including economic and social factors.

Through human judgment, the entrepreneur makes an effort to manage uncertainty by balancing decisions on production, resource quantities, and transaction costs to achieve desirable profitability (Cantillon, 1755/2015). Cantillon (1755/2015) observed multiple levels of entrepreneurs from the population that he studied. The first level of entrepreneurs, the proprietary landowners, harnessed essential resources available such as land and labor to earn profit they presumed was achievable notwithstanding the uncertainties associated with their economic activities (Cantillon, 1755/2015). To achieve the anticipated profit, the first level entrepreneurs require the application of precise human judgments. In that context, the results of the entrepreneurial activities depend on the precision of human judgment. If the conceived value of a course of action does not align with reality, the entrepreneur bears the risk of loss of profit.

Based on Cantillon's description, the second level of entrepreneurs attached to the first consists of artisans, laborers, farmers, and other business undertakers dependent on the landowners. These second level entrepreneurs also make decisions that affect the profitability of the first level. A situation of mutual benefit, thus, exists for both the first and second level of entrepreneurs. This relationship epitomizes the multilevel marketing arrangement and emphasizes the interconnectedness of decision making at each level for the overall success of the network. Given that human judgment includes uncertainty and has a multiplier effect on the outcome of economic activities, an entrepreneur must innovate to overcome production challenges and increase the probabilities of

sustainability (Shademan Khakestar, Hassani, Moarefvand, & Madani, 2016; Shim & Park, 2016).

Cantillon (1755/2015) pointed out that entrepreneurs make human judgments to adjust their production to meet demands at the market price. Leonidou, Christodoulides, and Thwaites (2014) observed that increasing problems associated with reliance on the natural environment has necessitated firms adapting to their operations to environmentally friendly activities. Sensitivity to environmental factors or prevailing circumstances and adjustments of operations to cope with unfavorable changes, thus, becomes essential to sustainability. Given the perceptions and uncertainties regarding the multilevel marketing industry, the entrepreneurship theory is relevant to exploring processes and success strategies available to multilevel marketers for building and retaining productive downlines and sustaining their businesses.

Multilevel Marketing and Entrepreneurship

Multilevel marketing is a form of direct selling (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). Direct selling is the process in which a company utilizes an independent sales force to directly market and retail goods and services to its customers (Bobâlcă, 2014; Racołța-Paina & Luncasu, 2014). While direct selling is commissioned-based selling, multilevel marketing adds a business opportunity component to the mix (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). Multilevel marketing or network marketing is a business structure and marketing strategy where each distributor (entrepreneur) recruits a network of distributors (downlines) compensated not only for their own personal sales but also on the sales of their downlines (Ciongradi, 2017; Košnarová, 2013). Consequently, multiple levels of

compensation exist (Košnarová, 2013) for each entrepreneur who focuses on building a profitable and sustainable business (Cantillon, 1755/2015).

Entrepreneurship is the process in which an individual or group of individuals combine innovation, risk-taking, and commitment to sustain a business venture (Sahut & Peris-Ortiz, 2014). According to Dai, Teo, and Wang (2017), multilevel marketing is a pathway into entrepreneurship for people who otherwise would not have that opportunity because of financial and economic constraints. However, some engage in entrepreneurial activity as a pathway out of poverty only out of necessity rather than choice (Singh, 2015; Warner, Lieberman, & Roussos, 2016). In a study performed by Carland Jr., Carland, and Carland III (2015), individuals who used their business ventures only to satisfy basic financial needs had a lower entrepreneurial drive than those who saw their businesses as a means of achieving self-esteem and self-actualization. Carland et al. (2015) concluded that not all business owners are entrepreneurs. Hence, in multilevel marketing, distributors recruiting individuals who are only looking for additional funds to meet their basic financial needs may lack the entrepreneurial drive and commitment to build and sustain their multilevel marketing businesses. Engaging in multilevel marketing without an entrepreneurial drive beyond meeting basic financial needs, therefore, may work against sustaining businesses during the first 5 years of operations.

Multilevel Marketing as an Alternative to Traditional Marketing

Traditional marketing involves advertising and promotion and does not allow for the face-to-face interaction and emotional encounters that non-traditional marketing allows (Kimmel, 2015). Popovici, Muhcină, and Popovici Alina (2018) noted that

traditional marketing focuses on selling whereas online and other non-traditional marketing emphasizes helping. Multilevel marketing, like other forms of direct selling, is an alternative to traditional sales and marketing and does not involve selling from a fixed retail location (Mădălina, 2014; Rozhkov, 2014). Unlike traditional marketing, which mainly focuses on closing the deal, direct selling is about relationships (Mădălina, 2014). Košnarová (2013) stated that traditional marketing includes compensation for the sale of products and services, while relationship marketing includes recruiting agents and creating long-term relationships with them. Companies are moving from strictly having a transactional attitude evident in traditional marketing to being relational, developing long-term and trusting relationships with customers and other stakeholders (Setyawan, Purwanto, Dharmmesta, & Nugroho, 2016; Siemieniako & Gębarowski, 2017; Watson IV, Weaven, Perkins, Sardana, & Palmatier, 2018). Mădălina (2014) identified direct sales as a practical and sustainable alternative to traditional sales, stating that it has many economic advantages including speed of service and more effective customer relations. Multilevel marketing, also called referral marketing, includes a new innovative marketing strategy that helps eliminate the huge media advertising and sales promotion costs usually associated with traditional marketing (Koroth, 2014). Košnarová (2013) indicated that multilevel marketing allows the company to promote its products and services without the inflated costs of promotion.

Buzz marketing is a marketing technique where individuals are encouraged to share information about an event or experience to stimulate word of mouth marketing (Kimmel, 2015). Rollins, Anitsal, and Anitsal (2014) described buzz marketing as a form

of viral marketing where the marketer creates excitement about the product or service through striking marketing messages. Direct selling is a form of buzz marketing, which Attaran, Notarantonio, and Quigley Jr. (2015) found more influential than traditional marketing initially. However, in the long term, because consumers are uncertain about the credibility and selling intent associated with non-traditional marketing, the positive response goes away (Attaran et al., 2015). Given that multilevel marketing is a form of direct selling and direct selling is a form of buzz marketing, inference can be made that many traditionalists view multilevel marketing negatively. The traditional perception of multilevel marketing is that it is not trustworthy and is considered as contrived and deceptive (Albaum & Peterson, 2011). However, Albaum and Peterson (2011) argued that these views are only traditionalists' perceptions without substantiation. To explore the allegations by Attaran et al. (2015) and Albaum and Peterson's (2011) traditionalists as well as Albaum and Peterson's counter-argument, I conducted further study of networking and word of mouth marketing to determine what other researchers are saying about the authenticity of multilevel marketing.

Networking and word of mouth marketing. Many businesses use word of mouth marketing to spread the buzz about their products and services. Word of mouth marketing is an effective tool in influencing consumer attitudes and buying behavior (Mohtasham, Sarollahi, & Hamirazavi, 2017). Mohtasham et al. (2017) suggested that word of mouth marketing helps to create a favorable image and bring about significant benefits to the company. Considering the direct selling (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014) and referral or relationship nature (Mădălina, 2014) of multilevel marketing, networking and

word of mouth marketing are critical aspects of this review of literature. Networking, in the context of multilevel marketing, requires recruiting and replicating downlines to achieve sales objectives (Droney, 2015). Lee (2014) pointed out that marketing networks enhance the competitiveness of a business in its resource acquisition. Marketing networks promote knowledge sharing (Lee, 2014) and the opinion and information that people share affect consumer behavior (Berger, 2014). Word of mouth, thus, becomes relevant in the process of opinion and information sharing in social networks.

Word of mouth communication is a key tool in multilevel marketing (Kořnarová, 2013). With word of mouth marketing, a company's leaders give its products or services to persons, called brand ambassadors, who then share and spread the word about their experience with the products or services (Buttle & Groeger, 2017). Similarly, the definition of word of mouth marketing is any positive or negative statement made by a current, former, or future customer about a product or service the company offers (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014).

Brand ambassadors reach other persons not only through face-to-face interaction, but also through their use of email, Twitter, Facebook, chat rooms, and blogs. The notion exists that word of mouth marketing, utilizing various social media outlets and methods, such as blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, is more effective for business success than traditionally paid marketing (Pauwels, Aksehirli, & Lackman, 2016). Word of mouth marketing is an alternative tool to traditional marketing and is an effective way of getting the message to its intended recipients through trusted friends and family members (Buttle & Groeger, 2017). Berger (2014), considering word of mouth communication as being

goal driven, presented five key functions it performs. The functions of word of mouth mentioned were (a) impression management, (b) emotion regulation, (c) information acquisition, (d) social bonding, and (e) persuasion (Berger, 2014). Understanding these functions of word of mouth communication may enhance the direct selling experience. I explored each function in detail.

Impression management function of word of mouth connotes that information sharing within the network shapes the opinion of people about others or themselves (Berger, 2014). Invariably, the likelihood exists that individuals may choose selective communication to enhance the opinion others have about them. Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill (2014) suggested that the likelihood that a level of dishonesty associated with word of mouth marketing is apparent. Thus, certain traditionalists look at this type of marketing, which includes multilevel marketing, as suspect. This view of the multilevel marketing industry and the associated stigma is one of the reasons direct sellers quit. Notwithstanding reservations that some school of thought may have about word of mouth communication, the knowledge and information sharing feature avails individuals project their actual or desired profile to others (Berger, 2014). Thus, multilevel marketers can use word of mouth communication to project the profile of their business to win over newer downlines.

Emotion regulation connotes a mechanism for managing the emotional reactions to adverse product or service experience (Berger, 2014). This mechanism may include providing social support, showing empathy by letting the angered customer talk about their ordeal, or helping a victim of a negative experience make sense out of the event

(Berger, 2014). Emotional regulation may also help an individual relive a positive experience or arouse interests or affection toward the desired goal (Berger, 2014). Thus, in a network of close social ties, when customers share negative experiences, word of mouth communication may be more harmful than beneficial to a multilevel marketer unless there is prompt intervention to address the situation. Multilevel marketers may need to include emotional regulation as part of their training to maintain productivity.

Company personnel uses information acquisition to address the indecision of individuals in the network (Berger, 2014). Word of mouth communication makes information acquisition possible by the opportunity to seek advice in the network and leveraging on the experience of others to get problems solved (Berger, 2014). Thus, multilevel marketers may use word of mouth marketing to disseminate information to gain more customer and distributor leads. In the process, information shared could support solving existing problems, which may lead to more patronage and loyalty.

Word of mouth communication affords a type of bonding that helps to reduce the feeling of social exclusion (Berger, 2014). Social bonding represents the platform for people to meet their needs to interact with other people (Berger, 2014). The more people interact, the more they stay together, resulting in stronger social ties. Word of mouth marketing, thus, presents as an avenue for strengthening a multilevel marketing network. Berger (2014) pointed out that the more strongly knit people are by social ties, the stronger the reinforcement of opinions shared. This point may be beneficial to multilevel marketers. Multilevel marketers require the power of persuasion to increase their networks. Berger (2014) suggested that word of mouth has the potential to present as

persuasive communication to achieve patronage or increased sales. Given that interpersonal communication reflects in word of mouth communication in a network, word of mouth serves as a medium of influencing the opinion of others and their decisions. A multilevel marketer with effective interpersonal communication skills may influence the direction of others in a situation of making a choice or decision from a set of available alternatives.

Marketers need to understand that negative information travels faster than positive information and therefore they should put strategies in place when utilizing word of mouth and e-word of mouth marketing (King et al., 2014). Trust is a key aspect of word of mouth marketing to be successful in affecting the end users' decisions (Liu et al., 2015). Likewise, influence is established when the brand ambassador has a significant following with significant interaction (Liu et al., 2015). A brand ambassador is someone who acts on behalf of a company to effectively spread its message to the ambassador's audience or following and contributes to the company's success by being visible, iconic, and inspiring (Apostolakis, Jaffry, Sizeland, & Cox, 2015; Dumont & Dumont, 2018; Mazzei & Quarantino, 2017). Multi-level marketers act as brand ambassadors for the companies they represent and for which they are distributors. Factors affecting the trust and influence that the brand ambassador has over the customer include the expertise of the deliverer, interpersonal relationship between deliverer and receiver, the strength of the message being delivered, prior experience with the deliverer and brand, and the perceived value of the brand (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014).

On the other hand, customers will lose trust when the brand ambassador sends negative messaging when the deliverer's perceived expertise is low, and when there has been previous negative experience with the brand ambassador or the brand itself (Sweeney et al., 2014). This mistrust can negatively affect direct sellers' morale and eventually their sales, which could lead them to quit. I will continue to explore what literature includes regarding why people join direct selling companies and why they drop out.

Why People Join Multilevel Marketing Companies

Multilevel marketing attracts people who want to be business owners, who only want to invest a small amount of cash to begin, generate income setting their own goals and objectives, network with others, and have flexibility with their schedule (Wells, 2013). Multilevel marketing does not have many specific requirements for entry, which makes it attractive to individuals who are unemployed and looking for income opportunities or to those wanting the freedom of entrepreneurship (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). However, the absence of experience and specific requirements sometimes manifest itself in the lack of proper communication between direct sellers and customers (Omar, 2014). Communication skills are a key factor for direct sellers, not only to attract potential customers but to persuade them to buy, and then to retain them as a long-term client and even becoming a member distributor as well (Omar, 2014). Omar (2014) indicated that when direct sellers are prepared, they are better communicators with those they are selling and prospecting. Therefore, preparation for presentations should be a key focus.

Direct selling and multilevel marketing include many positive factors that appeal to entrepreneurs and others seeking an opportunity to build a business and earn extra income, including the opportunity to expand internationally (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). Some other factors include convenience, career growth, and other opportunities. Discussions below reflect differing views of researchers on the validity of these factors as outlined below.

The convenience of multilevel marketing. Both buyers and sellers want convenience in the shopping experience and multilevel marketing and other direct selling companies have this built into their model. Many are attracted to direct selling because of its ease of entry, flexibility, and minimal experience requirements (Isac & Isac, 2011). Jyoti and Suneja (2013) supported Isac and Isac (2011) by indicating the advantages of multilevel marketing, sometimes called structure marketing. Multilevel marketing has different advantages for distinct groups (Jyoti & Suneja, 2013). For distributors, investment is low, little training is required, and multilevel marketing serves as an aid in helping them develop new networks and friends (Jyoti & Suneja, 2013). For companies, the cost of advertising and recruitment are low in multilevel marketing (Jyoti & Suneja, 2013). For the economy, multilevel marketing contributes to economic growth as economists consider multilevel marketing as a form of employment (Jyoti & Suneja, 2013). Wells (2013) confirms that direct sales companies have a much lower start-up cost compared to retail distribution companies. Due to the low barriers to entry and low recruitment costs noted by Isac and Isac (2011), Jyoti and Suneja (2013), and Wells

(2013), multilevel marketing might be a potential convenient source of income generation for distributors and the companies they represent.

Career growth and other opportunities. Income-generating opportunities are one of the benefits offered to anyone wanting to own a small business using multilevel marketing as a vehicle, along with the opportunity to build self-esteem and develop personally. Anyone who wants to own and operate a business in the United States and worldwide can do so through direct selling and multilevel marketing (Burch, 2016; Hatchaleelaha & Wongsurawat, 2016). Multilevel marketing has grown worldwide and is one of the largest income generators (Babu & Anand, 2015). For individuals with varying backgrounds and characteristics, job opportunities are a bi-product of multilevel marketing, and beyond providing opportunities to make money and build self-esteem, it affords the opportunity to make friends, foster entrepreneurial skills, and learn about business (Hiranpong, Decharin, & Thawesaengskulthai, 2016; Tyre, 2015; Vataminescu, Gazzola, Dinca, & Pezzetti, 2017). In support, Sourav, Singla, and Shashi (2015) indicated that individuals involved in multilevel marketing obtain employment and Keep and Vander Nat (2014) noted that personal development is part of the training obtained as a multilevel marketer. According to Franco and Gonzalez-Perez (2016), multilevel marketing distributors have access to frequent conferences with guest speakers from around the world, which increases their network value and used for more international expansion. International expansion creates the opportunity for more sales and growth. However, Rozhkov (2014) indicated that the direct selling and multilevel marketing industries might need to do more work to make the population more aware of the benefits

and business opportunities available in direct sales and multilevel marketing. Also, the population needs additional education to be more literate regarding the industry (Rozhkov, 2014).

People are attracted to multilevel marketing because of the lucrative compensation plan (Sourav et al., 2015). Multilevel marketing distributors motivate their prospects to join their team by offering them a quick return on their investment, in addition to huge permanent income (Koroath, 2014). These claims could be problematic if these expectations go unmet. Below, I will focus on whether the disappointment of not making the quick return and huge permanent income promised by upline distributors could be the likely reason for turnover in direct selling companies.

Turnover in Direct Selling Companies

Direct selling organizations continue to experience a large distributor turnover among their sales force (Koroath, 2014). The worldwide turnover rate among direct sellers is high. Wren, Berkowitz, and Grant (2014) indicated that in some cases the turnover is as high as 100%. When direct sellers quit, leaving consumers without a supplier, consumers develop a negative perception of the company and the industry (Rattanaphan & Mat, 2014). Demographic factors have little to no impact on direct sellers' decisions to quit, but behavioral factors have a major impact (Wotruba, Brodie, & Stanworth, 2005). These behavioral factors include job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perceived image of the direct selling industry, job rewards, and career growth (Wotruba et al., 2005). Koroath (2014) on the other hand concluded that low expectations, poor job image, inadequate job satisfaction, and intentions to quit are the reasons for the high turnover.

The absence of those behavioral factors indicated by Wotruba et al. (2005) as well as the issues noted by Koroth (2014) may contribute to the turnover rate and the negative image of the direct selling industry.

Direct sellers are sales managers who own their individual direct selling businesses. Sales organizations place numerous resources in the growth and development of their salespeople (Katsikea, Theodosiou, & Morgan, 2015). Similarly, in direct selling companies, new and existing distributors receive training. Direct selling companies offer this training to retain competent personnel for the long term. In practice, however, 30% to 70% of salespeople quit every year and 97% of direct selling distributors quit within the first year (Bosley & McKeage, 2015; Katsikea et al., 2015). Although, direct selling turnover is much higher than sales managers' turnover, exploring the reason for both is important to avoid certain factors. These factors include replacement costs and reduced morale among remaining sales personnel or distributors as well as disgruntled customers. Some other factors noted by Katsikea et al. (2015) that may affect turnover are role ambiguity, role conflict, and role stressors.

Role ambiguity occurs when the sales personnel lacks clarity because they did not receive enough information regarding the role and associated responsibilities (Schmidt, Roesler, Kusserow, & Rau, 2014). Role conflict, on the other hand, occurs when the sales personnel feels caught between two conflicting roles and thus suffers emotional stress with the decision on which role to choose (Schmidt et al., 2014). Role ambiguity and role stress are role stressors (Schmidt et al., 2014). Moura, Orgambídez-Ramos, and Gonçalves (2014) agreed and added that a combination of the three affects job

satisfaction. Some solutions include formalized rules, clear practices and direction, and organizational structure (Katsikea et al., 2015). When multilevel marketers are clear about their role, the less stressed they may be, and the more likely they are to be more productive.

Direct sellers want to know that the work they do is important and valued and that they are making a difference in people's lives. According to Jaramillo, Mulki, and Boles (2013), salespersons choose seeking purpose over seeking profits because they want to feel a sense of belonging. More than just the opportunity to make money, salespeople want to have a meaningful experience and perform better if what they are doing is interesting, creative, and provides opportunities to learn and grow (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Jaramillo et al. (2013) indicated that a meaningful experience comes when the salesperson operates in an ethical environment, including having quality products and services as well as when customer demandingness is present, which means there are demands from customers that allow the salesperson to learn and grow. However, when the customer is extremely demanding, meaning the customer has no regard for the needs of the salesperson, but the salesperson must provide exceptional services, then the salesperson becomes stressed (Jaramillo et al., 2013). When the salesperson's stress increases, performance decreases, which eventually leads to turnover (Jaramillo et al., 2013).

Turnover can be costly to businesses, including multilevel marketing businesses. Companies need to understand how to address turnover to avoid the negative effects such as continuous training and poor customer service (Wren et al., 2014). Jaramillo et al.

(2013) posited that the solution for turnover is to alleviate salesperson stress by providing training that would help the salesperson interact positively with demanding customers. Wren et al. (2014) concluded that the following variables play a significant role in the salesperson's propensity to leave: organizational commitment, satisfaction with pay, family status, job involvement, compensation plan, and level of education. While previous research indicated that job variety, freedom to make decisions, and self-supervision lend themselves to lower turnover, sales managers (multilevel marketers) should provide more support and guidance to salespeople (downline) (Wren et al., 2014). Wren et al. (2014) also suggested that companies encourage increased learning by providing incentives and additional opportunities to those who participate in these increased learning opportunities. In addition, a one-size-fits-all compensation structure is not the best way but instead, understanding what motivates each salesperson and providing the options of fixed income versus commissions is key (Wren et al., 2014). Executives in multilevel marketing companies may benefit by reviewing their compensation structure to determine if it is considerate of various personality types of their distributors.

Perceived Multilevel Marketing Failure Factors

Small business failure remains a popular discussion after many years, with varying views on the driving force between the success and failure of small businesses. Understanding the reason for small business failure, and specifically, multilevel marketing businesses, may help in creating a roadmap for success. Wells (2013) posited that one reason for failure in multilevel marketing is because distributors are independent

contractors and therefore multilevel marketing companies have little control over what representatives do. When the economy is in a downturn, a high volume of new distributors surface, seeking alternative income generating sources; however, once the economy transitions to more favorable conditions, distributors tend to quit since many have not reached the level of success they expected (Rozhkov, 2014). According to Siahaan, Lumbanraja, and Chairunisa (2014), the distributor's inability to motivate their downline and the distrust of prospective buyers using their products are two reasons that distributors are not successful in their multilevel marketing ventures. Bobâlcă (2014) further expanded upon buyer distrust, concluding that customers are not loyal if they are not satisfied, do not trust the brand, do not trust the salesperson, and are not consistently served by the salesperson. According to Wells (2013), the following issues contribute to the failure of small businesses, including multilevel marketing businesses (a) bad hiring decisions, which sometimes cause irreparable damage; (b) no policies prohibiting office romances, which cause issues in the company; and (c) owners desperate for cash flow who break rules, which ultimately lowers morale.

The image of the direct selling and multilevel marketing industry. Many traditional marketers view the multilevel marketing industry negatively. Albaum and Peterson (2011) indicated that the allegations of multilevel marketing as a pyramid scheme, which makes a profit on just the growth of a network itself and not from the sales of the network, are not valid. Wells (2013) indicated that a pyramid is one in which participants receive compensation for recruiting only without any actual sale of products and services. Hatchaleelaha and Wongsurawat (2016) clarified the difference between a

pyramid scheme and multilevel marketing. Hatchaleelaha and Wongsurawat (2016) indicated with a pyramid scheme, people receive pay for recruiting without marketing and selling goods and services, whereas with multilevel marketing, distributors receive compensation for selling goods and services through multiple levels of independent representatives. Racołța-Paina and Luncasu (2014) also shared that other perceived unethical practices in multilevel marketing include appealing to greed by selling to family members and friends and abusing the host-guest and professional-client relationships. Schiffauer (2018) stated that some people join multilevel marketing because they feel obligated and pressured to support. Li, Nontasak, and Tubsree (2016) noted that some multi-level marketing distributors are operating their multilevel marketing businesses improperly and dishonestly, which results in a negative perception of the multilevel marketing industry. Other factors contributing to the negative image of the direct selling industry negative attitude, no trust, perceived value is negative, internet fraud, no corporate social responsibility, and branding are confusing (Rattanaphan & Mat, 2014). Rattanaphan and Mat (2014) further explained that consumers becoming confused when the company embraces a multi-brand product strategy and confused consumers lead to a negative attitude. An increase in negative consumer attitude leads to a decrease in the company image (Rattanaphan & Mat, 2014).

However, the multilevel marketing companies and industry should consider many other factors regarding the potentially problematic view of multilevel marketing. Bloch (1996) listed some problem areas in multilevel marketing, including:

- (a) the pyramid-like structure associated with certain commission structures;

(b) the big catch, where some make a little money and some make lots of money but most make no money at all;

(c) high dropout rate;

(d) unacceptable behavior in that one is making money from their friends;

(e) selling friends a contract and asking them to do the same with their friends;

(f) distributors are told never to prejudge but rather present the opportunity to everyone;

(g) offer opportunity without telling what it is about; and

(h) never take rejection personally, although most inevitably do.

Unless companies and industry leaders address these factors, the negative perception of the industry will continue. Rozhkov (2014) posited that companies should be more attentive to the self-image that they display, which is quite impactful on the efforts of distributors and the perception left in the customer's mind.

The code of conduct established by the Direct Selling Association includes issues by establishing a set of ethical rules, which includes consumer rights and must be adhered to by direct selling companies (Racolța-Paina & Luncasu, 2014). Leaders of the Direct Selling Association actively seek to increase transparency in the industry, monitor member's compliance with the code of ethics and serves as an overall resource for the direct selling industry (Rozhkov, 2014). Individual companies have their own code of conduct as well, with the purpose of minimizing unethical business practices and encouraging integrity on the part of distributors (Wells, 2013). Another option for reducing dishonest and unethical behavior in the multilevel marketing industry is to

institute independent government legislation (Li et al., 2016). Rattanaphan and Mat (2014) support this by indicating that the government needs to step in more and give direction in the making of policies as it relates to legitimizing the direct selling industry in the eyes of the public. Distinguishing between pyramid schemes and legitimate multilevel marketing businesses is also an important area for consideration.

Pyramid scheme versus legitimate multilevel marketing. This section includes the discussion regarding how to distinguish between a pyramid scheme and a legitimate multilevel marketing business. A pyramid scheme, as it relates specifically to multilevel marketing, is when a distributor's primary method of income is from a percentage of the fees paid by his recruits (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). In other words, a pyramid scheme is one in which the distributor receives compensation for recruiting others even if no sale of products and services occurs (Wells, 2013). According to Babu and Anand (2015), with a pyramid scheme, only the distributors at the top make money; everyone else towards the bottom does not. On the contrary, a multilevel marketing company, as described by Racolța-Paina and Luncasu (2014), is distinguished from illegal pyramid schemes or Ponzi schemes when certain factors are in place. These factors are that the multilevel marketing company rewards the distributors for the sale of products or services and not just for the recruitment of new distributors; the cost of entry for distributors is low; and distributors achieve success over time as opposed to other get rich quickly and easily activities (Racolța-Paina & Luncasu, 2014).

Keep and Vander Nat (2014) noted that although the court found some multilevel marketing companies illegal pyramid schemes, legal multilevel marketing companies

exist. A multilevel marketing company is legitimate when the company (a) provides refunds for resalable inventory, (b) discourages inventory loading, (c) requires that distributors sell to a certain number of customers each month, and (d) does not pay commissions strictly for recruiting but rather on sales to customers (Keep & Vander Nat, 2014). Babu and Anand (2015) confirmed this list and added that the multilevel marketing company should offer accurate information about itself, its products or services, and distributor expectations.

Other potential failure factors. For many distributors, their participation in multilevel marketing is their first attempt at business ownership and with no formal training, the experience can be a daunting process. Krzyworzeka (2013) indicated distributors tasks are more challenging because they must deal with customers they do not know and may not have the support that regular salespeople receive. However, with proper training to give routine sales talks and the techniques in storytelling, distributors can usually overcome this challenge and become more effective and persuasive (Krzyworzeka, 2013).

According to Krzyworzeka (2013), distributors tend to burn out and become demotivated for several reasons. These reasons include (a) the experience of being a network marketer is new for most distributors, who are usually coming from or still working as employees, (b) the demanding nature of the work involved, (c) distributors may be afraid to make phone calls to potential customers, and (d) distributors do not have set working hours and tasks (Krzyworzeka, 2013). Distributors need the right support system in place to keep them motivated. Krzyworzeka (2013) suggested that distributors

break down their tasks into smaller activities that would be more manageable rather than seeing the big picture as that of an insurmountable mountain. Breaking down tasks into bite-sized chunks may help decrease overwhelm and reduce failure among multilevel marketers.

Relationship lines become blurry in the direct selling and multilevel marketing space because most companies teach their new distributors to create a list of everyone they know – from colleagues to friends to family (Krzyworzeka, 2013). Without boundaries between the private and public life of the distributor, relationships can become strained and even nonexistent. Krzyworzeka (2013) recommended a gradual immersion into the warm market, which means the distributor will use their warm market as their testing or training ground to gain more experience in this new endeavor, while letting them know that is what they are doing.

With new distributors being eager to make the sale, they sometimes come across as pushy, which makes the prospect uncomfortable. Krzyworzeka (2013) noted that without receiving an invitation to the sale from the potential customer, the distributor might appear to be a threat of exploitation. Tyre (2015) indicated that because each multilevel marketer is an independent distributor, they each have no formal authority and they are often conflicted between building their own business, sharing their knowledge, and helping others. This conflict results in multilevel marketers facing the challenge of managing their downline effectively (Tyre, 2015). Direct selling companies can mitigate this apparent threat and help distributors to come across more professional and willing to help, by training them to think of selling as providing much-needed services to enhance

the customers' lives (Krzyworzeka, 2013). This professionalism and willingness to help would help secure the trust of the customer and assist the distributor in building a loyal sales base, which according to Li et al. (2016) helps the distributor to achieve financial freedom. Tyre (2015) also noted that successful multilevel marketers must effective ways to impact their downline through inherent power and leadership. The next section includes further discussions on power and leadership.

Perceived Multilevel Marketing Success Factors

Small business owners must have certain traits to achieve success in their business. A successful small business owner incorporates a clear vision, the direction, for his or her business and ensures that the entire team adopts this vision (Perkins, Lean, & Newbery, 2017). With shared vision, more trust, better communication, and increased collaboration exist among stakeholders of the business, which help to reduce risk (Lee & Tamraker, 2018). Without shared vision, the likelihood of failure is greater. People who are self-driven are usually self-motivated to take more risks (Quintal, Thomas, Phau, & Soldat, 2017). Siahaan et al. (2014) posited that a mix of entrepreneurial competency, commitment, and motivation has an immense success for multilevel marketing distributors, with competency being the main ingredient. Competency is the knowledge and skills required for obtaining the desired outcome while commitment is the belief and emotional bond that drives dedication to the task, and motivation is what keeps the focus on the result rather than any obstacle that might be in the way (Siahaan et al., 2014).

Specific competencies mentioned by Siahaan et al. (2014) are creativity, innovation, self-motivation, as well as the ability to motivate others, and risk-taking.

Cantillon noted two competencies of good judgment and innovativeness, which are in line with the innovation and risk-taking mentioned by Siahaan et al. (2014). Risk-taking requires a level of good judgment to weigh the pros and cons of an action to experience the reward sought by the entrepreneur. Knowledge, skills, attitude, experiences, and contact and the ability to use them help to propel a distributor into success (Li et al., 2016). A new, inexperienced distributor may not possess these competencies; therefore, the distributor should seek to acquire these competencies quickly before burnout occurs. Rozhkov (2014) added that direct sellers must possess the attributes of time management and organization to meet their responsibilities of planning, individual presentation, personal visits, inventory management, and new order allocation.

The interaction between the salesperson and the customer is a key element of a successful sales transaction (Rozhkov, 2014). When a distributor provides a high standard of service and a quality product or service and adds effective interaction with the customer, the distributor is more likely to convert the transaction (Rozhkov, 2014). Customers do business with people they know, like, and trust. A distributor gains the trust of the customer when the distributor provides an accurate description of the product and its benefits (Rozhkov, 2014). Rozhkov (2014) noted that customer retention comes because of relationship building and trust.

Critical to a distributor's performance as a multilevel marketer are personal factors, such as age, gender, weight, race, appearance, and education or knowledge; skills; role; attitude or behavior in the sales process toward developing customer relationship; motivation; aptitude or abilities; organizational or environmental factors;

and the ability to use them (Li et al., 2016). Other perceived success factors per Li et al. (2016) are interaction intensity, mutual disclosure, and cooperative intentions. Interaction intensity means that there is a high positive interaction between the distributor and the customer, which may lead to increased trust and understanding (Li et al., 2016). Mutual disclosure is when the distributor openly shares personal and organizational information that leads to problem-solving and mutual understanding (Li et al., 2016). Cooperative intentions optimize the relationship between the distributor and the customer as it builds trust and communication between them (Li et al., 2016). The summary of what this is saying is that communication, mutual understanding, and trust are key for a successful business relationship between distributors and customers.

Business leaders must have or develop certain skills to meet customers' needs more effectively (Rozhkov, 2014). Business skills require the ability for the leader to manage business processes, which would include planning and being able to analyze situations as they arise, and this is key for the distributors in direct selling because they manage their own businesses (Rozhkov, 2014). Communication skills involve being sensitive to the customer's needs and desires, being able to have a positive impact on the customer, being persuasive without being pushy, and having great follow-up skills (Rozhkov, 2014). Organization skills involve the ability to schedule customer meetings, the delivery of products, and other operational support activities (Rozhkov, 2014). These competencies may not come naturally for most distributors and so distributors may need to develop them through some training.

Distributors can increase the effectiveness of their communication with their customers by being more knowledgeable about the direct selling industry, their direct selling company, the products and services that they are selling, and the marketing plan (Omar, 2014). Distributors gain this knowledge by attending training classes, listening to and reading business and other motivational material, observing other direct selling leaders communicate with customers, and doing their research on potential customers, so they understand them better (Omar, 2014).

Communication appears as a common thread as an attribute for success. However, communication should not appear restricted to the relationship between the distributor and the customer but also to the relationship between upline and downline. According to Košnarová (2013), effective communication between the leader (upline) and the distributor (downline) is necessary for success in many areas. Effective communication starts originally at the recruitment stage and includes persuasion and motivation; then planning and goal setting; then creating a strategy to achieve goals; then more motivation and education; and organizing and leading (Košnarová, 2013). The cycle should never stop while distributors are recruiting new downlines to their team. Beyond the human factors is the need to provide what the marketplace needs (Wells, 2013). Entrepreneurs must first understand their market needs and then provide products and services to satisfy those needs. Once entrepreneurs understand their market needs, the sale is easier. Direct selling, including multilevel marketing, includes flexibility, thorough and customized sales presentations, and person-to-person contact that allows for strong relationship marketing (Wells, 2013). In addition, as direct sellers are heavy users of the products and

services they sell, they would want to ensure that these products and services are effective and meet the needs of their customers (Rozhkov, 2014).

Outside of the competencies listed above, Tyre (2015) posited that multilevel marketers must have a substantial and sustainable downline to be proficient, efficient, and successful. To gain a substantial and sustainable downline, multilevel marketing leaders should seek to empower distributors to launch into success by creating massive action, momentum, and enthusiasm among their downline (Rubino, 2015). Friedner (2015) indicated that the upline/downline relationship is a relational management system used to facilitate accountability, efficiency, and motivation.

Factors differentiating results in direct sales. As direct sellers seek to cultivate, foster, and nurture success, several factors affect their results. Sypniewska (2013) noted that to experience success, multilevel marketers must possess or develop certain attributes that lead to superior outcomes when utilized. According to Sypniewska, these attributes include competencies, knowledge, attitudes, skills, a willingness to act, and a set of personality traits and predispositions. Sypniewska further concluded that once a multilevel marketer develops one of those competencies, the others would automatically fall in place. Li et al. (2016) on the other hand listed a different set of competencies that are mandatory for success, to include vision and strategic thinking, goal setting, interpersonal skills, self-knowledge, and technical knowledge as it relates to the specific type of business in which the direct seller is involved. These competencies will allow for a successful multilevel marketing leader when they coupled with integrity, honesty, communication, diversity consciousness, developing others, results-orientation, change

management, problem-solving, decision-making, political savvy, customer focus, team leadership, influence skills, conflict management, emotional intelligence, and social and environmental responsibility (Li et al., 2016). The factors are all internal factors and according to Li et al. (2016), accomplishable by formal education and training; personal development through coaching, mentoring, etc.; and self-help books, videos, tapes, computer programs, etc.

However, Djoni Oktaviani, and Kirbrandoko (2016) indicated that although internal factors such as satisfaction play a small role in sales performance, external factors such as incentives and rewards play a more significant role. Wells (2013) pointed out the importance of the manager's leadership style in encouraging high sales performance by indicating that a strongly motivated upline who exerts morale and motivation is key to the performance of their downline. Košnarová (2013) concurred with the necessity for strong leadership and posited that managerial functions consist of planning, organizing, selection, and deployment of workers, leading, and supervision. Organizing involves creating an organization structure, assigning tasks, and coordinating the activities of downlines (Košnarová, 2013). Leading, on the other hand, directs distributors toward task fulfillment and keeps them motivated (Košnarová, 2013).

Li et al. (2016) on the other hand look at external factors very differently in noting that external factors include things happening in society, the economy, technology, and cultural and legal aspects of the industry. According to Bobâlcă (2014), both internal and external factors are key. Additional competencies noted by Bobâlcă (2014) are the ability to sustain a high level of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty through personal

contact and relationship; increased friendship and problem-solving skills, which build trust; and greater product quality and diversification, which enhances satisfaction. Dai et al. (2017) noted that the organization's social or team environment affects distributors' self-efficacy, their desire for opportunity, and their motivation, which in turn affects their success or failure. A combination of internal and external factors affects the success of multilevel marketers and researchers need to hone more specific competencies required for success.

The impact of customer orientation on direct seller's success. Customer-oriented sales people experience variable results in direct selling because of their focus on developing a relationship with the customer and addressing their needs. A big part of a leader's marketing strategy is to focus on their customers' needs. Effective sales managers and leaders must create a balance between sales orientation, making the sale and customer orientation, satisfying the customer's needs (Kadic-Magljalic, Micevski, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, & Lee, 2017). According to Kaynak, Kara, Chow, and Laukkanen (2016), successful salespeople and businesses adopt customer orientation as part of their selling strategy, which means they focus extensively on customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is perceived quality and is measured by how the customer feels regarding whether the product or service met his or her expectations (Prasadh, 2018). Thus, direct sellers have the opportunity to implement adaptive techniques to satisfy their customers and prospects' needs. Addressing customers' needs yield more favorable results.

Furthermore, when direct sellers interact one on one with customers, they get to better understand the customers' needs and in turn provide the company with feedback,

allowing them to have more innovative ideas and develop new products and services to satisfy those needs (Rozhkov, 2014). This type of customer focus leads to customer retention and repeat purchases (Rozhkov, 2014). Hamilton, Rust, and Dev (2017) attributed customer retention to community building, which helps the customer to feel a part of the family and builds trust. In addition, offering quality products and services with features geared not just toward attracting new customers but retaining them as well (Hamilton et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the effects of the features and offerings are only known by trial and error, but once the company leaders positively identify a customer retention feature or offering, then they will save on customer acquisition and enjoy the benefits of repeat purchases (Hamilton et al., 2017).

Enhancing customer loyalty. The distributors seek customer loyalty to establish repeat sales. Customers are loyal when they can develop, enhance, and strengthen their relationships with their distributors and their associated company (Wang, Li, Wang, & Wang, 2015). Distributors are viewed as representatives of the company; therefore, customers would transfer their loyalty for the distributor to the company or for the company to the distributor (Wang et al., 2015). In other words, the distributor is a brand builder for the company. As previously mentioned, distributors act as brand ambassadors for their direct selling company and brand-building helps to set customer's expectations, which then eventually leads to customer loyalty (Wang et al., 2015). Trust links to perceived value and corporate image as observed by consumers, community, and stakeholders and it takes time to build (Rattanaphan & Mat, 2014).

Direct selling companies need to continually work on their branding as their distributors are relying on the company's brand image and prestige to make the sale (Wang et al., 2015). However, Wang et al. (2015) posited that the basis for customer loyalty lies with the performance of the distributor and therefore, distributors must be trained to be brand-builders. At the same time, because distributors leave companies, companies tend to work toward having the customer loyalty transferred from the distributor to the company and this can be accomplished by providing benefits and incentives that are tied directly to the company and not necessarily the distributor (Wang et al., 2015). This information seems to indicate that for multilevel marketing distributors to be successful beyond 5 years, the need to focus on building customer loyalty by relationship and brand-building.

Effect of Innovation in Multilevel Marketing

When company decision makers are seeking visibility and success in the marketplace, they must be innovative by not only generating ideas but also rallying the support to bring them to execution (Uusi-Kakkuri, Brandt, & Kultalahti, 2016). Innovation helps businesses remain competitive and survive by not only creating big ideas but by being able to execute those ideas (Kapasi & Davis, 2017). One of the strategic advantages experienced by company decision makers who innovate is cost reduction (Kapasi & Davis, 2017). Reduced cost is one benefit that multilevel marketing companies enjoy as they have little to no advertising cost because of the use of a network of distributors. The reduced costs enable multilevel marketing company leaders to pass on these savings to distributors in the form of commissions. Among other attributes,

innovators are persistent, self-confident, and independent as well as being open to change, trying new things, and ready to problem-solve (Uusi-Kakkuri et al., 2016). The attributes are important to the success of multilevel marketers. According to Lee, Lau, and Loi (2016), multilevel marketers prove their innovativeness and obtain benefits when they can convince a prospect to buy their products or services or join their network of distributors. Kapasi and Davis (2017) concluded that knowledge sharing contributes to innovation capability and not necessarily innovation performance, rather the ability to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and think outside the box is essential. Thus, indicating that capability alone is not enough, but the distributor must go a step further to generate the desired level of performance through out of the box thinking.

Innovation in multilevel marketing goes beyond the human level but is important on the product level as well. Customers are more engaged and supportive when the product is innovative and of high quality (Jain, Singla, & Shashi, 2015; Lee et al., 2016). Product innovation is a product of knowledge, but knowledge does not always lead to product innovation unless appropriately applied (Kapasi & Davis, 2017; Yusr, Mokhtar, Abaid, Perumal, & Fauzi, 2018). Partnering with customers who provide ideas that are then transferred into products adopted by those customers is key to a company's success (Yusr, et al., 2018). The entrepreneur is the one that transfers the knowledge, internal as well as from customers, into innovation (Yusr, et al., 2018). Therefore, leaders of multilevel marketing companies must intentionally use their knowledge gained to create more innovative products for distributors to sell. The more innovative products multilevel marketing distributors pass on to their customers, the greater their chances of success.

With Cantillon (1755/2015), adding human judgment to information and knowledge about the market translates to innovation. Cantillon's innovation, from the supply perspective, required that the entrepreneur concurrently controls cost (transportation) and maximize profit by selling products at a higher price than its production or acquisition cost. Multilevel marketers, and more specifically the companies they represent, may need to update their knowledge about the market and the elasticity of its components to achieve more innovation leading to cost minimization and profit maximization for the sustainability of their business during the first 5 years of operations.

Conclusion

The attrition rate among multilevel marketers continues high, despite multilevel marketing is one of the fastest growing industries in the United States (Bosley & McKeage, 2015; Koroth, 2014; Neațu & Imbrișcă, 2016; Wren et al., 2014). Many individuals are attracted to the multilevel marketing industry because of the convenience of career growth and other opportunities (Isac & Isac, 2011). However, because of the ease of entry, the vetting process by recruiters is not as firm in many instances, and so most of the entrants into this type of business venture lack the necessary skills and competencies to achieve success (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016; Isac & Isac, 2011; Omar, 2014). Some of the attributes and competencies identified in previous research are knowledge, attitudes, and skills; self-motivation and a willingness to act; coachability and competitiveness; the ability to sustain a high level of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty; problem solving skills; and building trust by developing strong friendships (Bobâlcă, 2014; Li et al., 2016; Siahaan et al., 2014). Besides those internal factors

previously mentioned, external factors such as manager's leadership style, product quality, and diversification play a crucial role as well (Bobâlcă, 2014; Wells, 2013).

In this case study, I will explore the attributes and competencies relevant to multilevel marketers' success. I will seek to identify whether these attributes and competencies are all-inclusive, whether I should add more to the list, or if any are questionable. Understanding what factors lead to the sustainability of multilevel marketing businesses during the first 5 years of operations, may allow for a roadmap for distributors to follow that will lead to increased success in the multilevel marketing industry.

Transition

Section 1 contained an outline of the foundation of this research study, its purpose, background, significance, the nature of the study, the research questions, and limitations of the study, conceptual framework, as well as an overview of literature that exists relating to small businesses and multilevel marketing. The research design was a qualitative study, and the focus of the interview questions stated was to extract the strategies needed by multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline and achieve success. Section 2 will contain more information on the research method and will include an examination of the role of a researcher, sampling techniques, and study participants. Furthermore, I will state the guiding criteria for selecting the data collecting technique, the instruments, and process for the collection and analysis of data.

Section 2: The Project

In the United States and internationally, multilevel marketing companies provide income opportunities to those who are unemployed, underemployed, those seeking additional income, and those who are looking to become entrepreneurs with low barriers of entry (Franco & Gonzalez-Perez, 2016). Therefore, being aware of how to build a successful and sustainable multilevel marketing business is paramount to these emerging multilevel marketing leaders. In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored strategies some business leaders use within the multilevel marketing industry to build and retain a productive downline and sustain their business during the first 5 years of operations. In this section, I describe how I used interview questions as a technique to collect data from successful multilevel marketers, in addition to documentation and review of information from multiple sources to triangulate the data for the study. The findings of this study might provide new insights to assist individuals interested in the multilevel marketers' success rate.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. The targeted population consisted of three multilevel marketers from three separate companies in New York, who succeeded in business for at least 5 years and earned a six-figure income annually for at least 2 of those years. These multilevel marketers participated in semistructured interviews with open-ended questions. The implication for positive social change includes a decrease in the unemployment rate as

well as increased retail sales and tax revenue. These positive social changes may result from the potential to provide key success factors to aspiring and existing multilevel marketers, leading to the economic expansion of multilevel marketers and increase the sustainability of multilevel marketing companies.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative case study design, the researcher is the primary instrument who collects the data (Yin, 2014). My role was to collect, store, and analyze data from interviews, as well as obtain documentation to report my findings accurately. The 1979 Belmont Report, made by members of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, includes the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of humans (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). I adhered to the underlying ethics and principles of the Belmont Report. These principles and guidelines include guidance to assure respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Fiske & Hauser, 2014).

I live in Pennsylvania, a bordering state to New York and was a multilevel marketer for a few years. From personal experience, various setbacks resulted in me ceasing operations. Understanding the strategies necessary to build and retain a productive downline, achieve success, and sustain a multilevel marketing business during the first 5 years of operations are possible key outcomes from this study. I have not worked with the participants with no previous relationships with them. To mitigate bias and increase dependability, Yin (2014) outlined a case study research guide, known as the interview protocol, which I followed as attached in Appendix A. The interview

protocol helps reduce bias and increase accuracy, reliability, and validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Participants

I collected data from three multilevel marketers who have successfully implemented strategies to build and retain a productive downline, sustain their businesses during the first 5 years of operations, and earned a six-figure income for at least 2 of those years. Yazan (2015) indicated that the case study design includes guidance for the researcher to follow in answering the research question. Similarly, using the purposive sampling technique aids the researcher in obtaining the specific information required from a population of participants likely to have that information and reach data saturation sooner than with some other methods (Yin, 2014). Consequently, I used the purposive sampling technique in my selection of candidates who meet the criteria to participate in the study. To participate, multilevel marketers met the following criteria (a) operations based in New York (b) in business for at least 5 years and (c) earned a six-figure income for at least 2 of those 5 years. To ensure that participants fit the criteria for a case study, Yin (2014) suggested an extensive screening of the candidates. Therefore, having the selection criteria and the research question in alignment, I ensured that I only selected qualified participants.

I used the study criteria to purposefully select the participants. According to Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015), researchers must establish a precise plan to gain access to study participants, including utilizing personal contacts. Topolovec-Vranic and Natarajan (2016) suggested accessing participants using social media. Flood-Grady et al.

(2017) indicated that once the researcher identifies potential study participants, calling them on the phone and asking them to participate is more personal than contacting them by mail. Upon the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I gained access to participants by contacting the appropriate personnel in the three multilevel marketing companies by way of email and requesting a list of candidates who fit the criteria. In addition, I contacted individuals within my local network and on Facebook and LinkedIn to find multilevel marketing leaders who fit the criteria. Once I located potential participants, I contacted them by phone and email, and asked them to participate. Once they accepted, they received an informed consent form to get them onboard.

Yin (2014) recommended that interviewers establish a working relationship with the participants by building trust but without manipulating the directions of the interview. My strategy to gain access to the participants qualifying for an invitation to the interview was to establish a rapport through email and telephone that ensured a working relationship. The next step was to share the informed consent form used to explain the research study, establish confidentiality, share the interview protocol, and obtain official agreement to participate. Consistent with the position of Singh (2014), I built rapport with the study participants by clarifying the purpose of the interviews and explaining how I will use the data. White and Hind (2015) suggested that the interviewer should build rapport and work in partnership with the interviewee for a more effective interview process as well as a more effective qualitative research study. Thus, my approach during the interviews was to ensure that participants felt the sense of partnership in the data

gathering process and did not withhold information vital and relevant to the success of the study.

Research Method and Design

The central research question for this study is the following: What strategies do multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations? According to Yin (2014), the research question should be the basis for determining the research method and design. In this section, I provide support for my decision to use a qualitative multiple case study.

Research Method

The three types of research methodology an individual can choose from are quantitative, qualitative, and the mixed method (Gill, 2014; Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016; Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014). According to Gelling and Engward (2015) and Yazan (2015), a researcher must select the most appropriate design and method to answer the central research question and achieve the overall study objective. I considered the appropriateness of the three types of methodologies and chose the qualitative method. Qualitative research is relevant to gaining useful insight about the phenomenon (Johnson, 2014). Bailey (2014) posited that qualitative research helps the researcher gain an understanding of customer motivation. Furthermore, Koch, Niesz, and McCarthy (2014) indicated that qualitative research helps the researcher to analyze the lives and social environments of participants to understand their view of processes, practices, and phenomena.

Quantitative research is effective when scientifically testing hypotheses (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), with quantitative research, the researcher evaluates the variables or components of parts of an issue. Furthermore, quantitative researchers use measurements and generalizations to objectively analyze and determine the causality of a fixed set of data (Bryman, 2015; Simpson & Lord, 2015; Starr, 2014). The quantitative method was not appropriate for this study because, with this method, the researcher focuses more on the cause of the problem rather than exploring the how of the solution through the data collected from the participants.

The mixed method study is a combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods used in understanding the research question (Hesse-Biber, 2015; Starr, 2014). Adopting the mixed method overcomes the insufficiency of the individual use of the qualitative and quantitative methods to answer a research question or reach an established goal (Bryman, 2015; Hesse-Biber, 2015). Although with the mixed method the researcher has the opportunity to take a more in-depth look at the research phenomenon, it is time-consuming (El Sherif, Pluve, Gore, Granikov, & Quan Nha, 2016; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). I did not choose the mixed method approach because of the time constraints for this study. I chose the qualitative method because the objective of the study was to gain insight from the thoughts and perspectives of the participants. I had no intention of carrying out tests or numeric and statistical analysis associated with the quantitative method. I used information collected from the expressed views and opinions of individuals to answer the research question of what successful strategies are available

to multilevel marketers. Therefore, neither the quantitative nor mixed method approach was appropriate to this study.

Research Design

Research designs often used in qualitative studies include ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Lewis, 2015). I used the qualitative case study design. According to Lewis (2015), the researcher uses ethnography when looking at the phenomenon in a cultural context. Hallett and Barber (2014) indicated that with ethnography, the researcher examines, through in-person observations and informal interviews, how individuals and groups go through the social world. Similarly, Hunt (2014) noted that in an ethnographic study, the researcher observes the day-to-day lives of a large group and their many complexities. The purpose of this research was not to understand the distinct cultural context, social world, and complexities of a large group. Hence, the inappropriateness of ethnography for this study.

With phenomenology, the researcher collects first-hand accounts of peoples' lived experiences and worldviews on identifiable issues to develop common themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). According to Bevan (2014) and Lewis (2015), the researcher makes a practical description of insights from participants' shared experience about a phenomenon. Beyond the in-depth description of participants' lived experiences, Chan and Walker (2015) posited that the researcher digs a little deeper to comprehend the nature and meaning of these experiences. To answer the research question for this study, I ensured that I had an in-depth understanding of the business problem through the eyes of

participants. Therefore, I did not consider phenomenology an appropriate design for addressing the purpose of the study.

With a case study design, the researcher collects various perspectives of the participants to add to the knowledge base of the investigated phenomenon (Almutairi, Gardner, & McCarthy, 2014). Cronin (2014) indicated that in using the case study design, the researcher gains insight into the experiences of the participants and Lewis (2015) said that the researcher in a case study abstracts the success stories of participants to demonstrate the effectiveness of the phenomenon of the study. According to Cronin (2014), the researcher gathers in-depth data to answer the research question either by using a single case or multiple cases. In addition, Bristowe et al. (2015), Cairney and Denny (2015), and Yin (2014) indicated that with a case study, the researcher gets the opportunity to gather richer information about the phenomenon in question. Hence, the appropriateness of the case study design to explore strategies that multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline and sustain multilevel marketing businesses during the first 5 years of operations.

To ensure the quality and richness of the research, the researcher must achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation occurs when the participants' responses begin to repeat and no new information is forthcoming during the interview process (Robinson, 2014). Data saturation demonstrates validity, completeness, comprehension, and accuracy and therefore allows for replication of the study (Elo et al., 2014). Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested that the researcher asks the participants the same interview questions to avoid not reaching data saturation because of inconsistency. As

part of the research design, I achieved data saturation by using a purposeful sample of three multilevel marketers from three multilevel marketing companies and posing the same open-ended interview questions to each. When I stopped receiving newer information from the interview process, I knew that I had reached data saturation.

Population and Sampling

The selection of the sample of three multilevel marketers for this study was through a purposeful sampling of three multilevel marketing companies in the New York. The multilevel marketers had to have been in business for more than 5 years and earned more than \$100,000 for at least 2 of those 5 years. Specific boundaries encompass the nature of the case study and thus, purposeful sampling procedures are more suitable than random sampling (Yin, 2014). With purposeful sampling, the researcher can gather rich data as it allows the researcher to use personal judgment to select participants who are knowledgeable in the field of study, based on a predefined criterion (Kornhaber, Wilson, Abu-Qamar, & Mclean, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2013). According to Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton (2015), researchers use purposive sampling to gain a clear understanding of the phenomenon.

Yin (2014) indicated that in a qualitative case study, a sample size between one and 10 participants is required. Fusch and Ness (2015) considered that acquiring quality and rich data was essential to reaching data saturation rather than a focus on the sample size. Case study sample size varies among researchers and depends on the nature and complexity of the phenomenon (Elo et al., 2014; Morse, 2015). Furthermore, Yin (2014) indicated that a sample size of two or three case studies is sufficient to allow the

researcher to obtain rich data to address the research question. Therefore, I selected three successful multilevel marketers to gather the rich data required to answer the research question of strategies used to build and sustain their businesses during the first 5 years of operations.

Excellent qualitative research work is dependent on reaching data saturation, which occurs when the participants stop providing any new information (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Elsayah, Guillaume, Filatova, Rook, and Jakeman (2015) indicated that when the researcher believes no new concepts are forthcoming, the researcher experiences data saturation and can stop data collection. To improve the rigor of the study, the researcher should be mindful of utilizing strategies to reach data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I conducted semistructured in-person interviews with each participant and asked open-ended questions until no new information became forthcoming. The interviews took place in a private professional environment, at a time and location convenient for each participant. Participants are more open to sharing quality information when they are in an environment that is comfortable for them and at a convenient time (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013).

Ethical Research

A primary consideration for the conduct of this study was to obtain approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University. Before collecting data for the study, I requested the IRB board to review and approve the study interview protocol and consent form. Check, Wolf, Dame, and Beskow (2014) indicated that for the protection of participants, the researcher must get IRB approval of the informed consent

before data collection. The purpose of the IRB approval is to minimize risk and ensure that benefits outweigh any risks to participants (Klitzman, 2013). Before data collection begins, academic officials should approve the research proposal (Strom, Buyse, Hughes, & Knoppers, 2014). After Walden University's IRB provided approval, I emailed participants to get their consent as part of the study and explained that their participation was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any point by phone or email. Participants did not receive any monetary incentives. However, I offered to give them a copy of the study results.

Cseko and Tremaine (2013) describe that participants have a higher level of trust when involved in a high-quality program with higher standards. Therefore, trust between the participants and the researcher is a key factor for a successful study. I included a copy of my National Institutes of Health's Certificate of Completion in this study. In addition, I kept the identity of the participants confidential by eliminating their names and including a generic identifier for each participant, for example, P1, P2, and P3.

To protect the rights of the participants, I am maintaining data in a safe place for 5 years. The manual files are in a fireproof safe while electronic files are on a flash drive. The destruction of both the manual and electronic files will be in 5 years after the completion date of my study. The final doctoral manuscript has the Walden IRB approval number and no inclusion of names or any other identifying information of individuals or organizations that participated in the study.

Data Collection Instruments

I worked as the primary data collection instrument for this qualitative multiple case study. Yin (2014) explained that the researcher in a study functions as the data collector, while Ritchie et al., 2013 added that the researcher might utilize multiple data collection instruments as necessary. I reviewed approved documents, such as welcome packs, multilevel marketers' guides or manuals to gain insight on strategies for strengthening the downline network. Semistructured interviews are another data collection source I used as I explored multilevel marketers' success strategies utilized to build a production downline in their businesses for the first 5 years. With a semistructured interview process, the researcher performs ongoing analysis and interpretation of that data, during and after the interview, which helps the researcher to decide when and if more data is needed to reach data saturation and to answer the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015; McIntosh & Morse, 2015; Peters & Halcomb, 2015).

Each participant received a pre-interview email containing the interview protocol and interview questions located in Appendix A and Appendix B. Brinkmann (2016) described the interview protocol as a detailed set of procedures developed to ensure each interview is consistent and to ensure reliability. Semistructured interview protocol is appropriate to maintain consistency and neutrality with participants (Huss, Sela, & Eastep, 2015). Participants have the autonomy to answer the central research questions with the interview questions proposed (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

I conducted face-to-face interviews as much as possible and utilized Zoom whenever a face-to-face interview was not convenient for the participant. Face-to-face interviews enhance the development of rapport between the researcher and the participant and aids in the generation of rich qualitative data (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). Jones, Simmons, Packham, Bynon-Davies, and Pickernell (2014) indicated that using observational skills while collecting during interviews aids in the collection of reliable data. Video conferencing, which includes Skype and Zoom, have almost the same benefits as face-to-face interviews, and is increasingly convenient for participants and researchers (Hamilton, 2014).

During the interview, I asked each participant the same set of questions in the same order. Ritchie et al. (2013) recommended that researchers ask interview questions in the same order to establish reliability. To enhance validity and reliability of the data collected from the interviews, I incorporated member checking during and after the interviews. Member checking is a process in which participants validate the accuracy of their responses and the interpretation of it, thus establishing the credibility of the study (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). According to Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, and Robertson (2013) and Higman and Pinfield (2015), member checking involves having the participants confirm that the data and the researcher's interpretation of it are accurate, therefore ensuring no gaps are left in responses and validating the credibility of the data.

Data Collection Technique

The data collection process for this multiple case study did not include any field tests but consisted of conducting semistructured face-to-face interviews. Zoom interviews took place when face-to-face was not possible. The advantage of conducting face-to-face interviews is that in collecting data, the person conducting the research is better able to establish rapport with the participants (Irvine et al., 2013). According to Irvine et al. (2013), almost the same advantages exist with videoconferencing such as Skype and Zoom interviews as with face-to-face interviews along with it being more convenient for both the researcher and the participants. When Zoom became the available option, I saved travel costs and the participant saved time from not having to be physically present in a specified location for the interview. In both cases, the researcher observes the participants and according to Hamilton (2014), people's cooperation and authenticity are better during face-to-face interviews as compared to telephone interviews. Irvine et al. (2013) noted that the disadvantage of face-to-face interviews is that the researcher and participant must be physically in the same space. In addition, coordinating the researcher and participant's time may pose a problem. Zoom does not present the same issue, as the parties will not have to factor in travel time because they can meet from a location convenient to them. However, the participant would need to be familiar with how to use that technology.

Appendix B contains the interview questions and Appendix A contains the interview protocol. The interview protocol included agreeing upon a mutual date, time, and location with the participants for the interview; making each participant aware of the

intention to record the interview; and notifying each participant about the retention of the data collected in a secure place for 5 years in accordance with Walden IRB guidelines. I recorded the interviews using my iPhone as a handheld digital recorder and the features of the Zoom application on my computer. I adopted the approach of manual transcription of the recordings of each interview. According to Yin (2014), transcribing the information is crucial for eliminating potential issues relating to accuracy, reliability, and interpretation. I used member checking for the data interpretation and transcript review. With member checking, the researcher captures the data, summarizes and interprets it, and then confirms with the participant that the researcher accurately understood their answers (Harvey, 2015). Trepal, Stinchfield, and Haiyasoso (2014) and Collins and Winter (2014) noted that using member checking increases the trustworthiness of findings and allows for a stronger, more enhanced study. In addition, according to O'Reilly and Parker (2013), member checking helps the researcher ensure data saturation by continuing to interview participants until no new information is apparent. Therefore, I continued to interview participants in the member checking process to ensure data saturation.

Data Organization Technique

In this study, I used my iPhone as a handheld digital recorder as well as the features of the Zoom application on my computer to record my interviews with the participants and for backup. To ensure each device operated properly and that the audio was loud and clear enough for transcription, I tested the functionality of both devices before moving forward with each face-to-face or Zoom interview. Jacob and Furgerson

(2012), for the research to be useful, the researcher must capture the interview and can understand it. I also used research logs and reflective journals to capture brief notes from the interview manually. Osborne (2016) indicated that the researcher utilizes a research log to record information gathered during the research. Using reflective journal writing helps writers think through strategies related to the information they are gathering (Cheng, 2017). Jacob and Furgerson (2012) recommended that the researcher should use a recording device and only take brief notes to maintain eye contact with the participants and observe their body language. According to Nordstrom (2015), researchers use recording devices to not only capture the words shared by participants but also the perceptions.

After collection, I transcribed the data within 2 weeks of recording and summarized responses in preparation for coding and analyzing the data. Elo et al. (2014) and Yin (2014) posited that the data transcription process is part of the research data collection and analysis procedures and involves some interpretation of the data to identify themes. According to Alase (2017), data coding is one of the most essential elements of qualitative research process in which the researcher searches for words and phrases repeated by the participants and identifies common themes from the interview responses. To code and analyze the data, I used NVivo, which is a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDS) program. Common themes emerged during analysis, which allowed me to evaluate the similarities and differences. Griffith (2014) recommended that the researcher keep the research data in a secure storage for at least 5 years. I did a back-up of the electronic data on a flash drive and stored it along with other physical data in a

fireproof safe. The protected data will remain in storage for 5 years from the date of completion of my study, after which I will destroy them.

Data Analysis

Fusch and Ness (2015) posited that researchers should use methodological triangulation to collect and analyze the data by employing multiple sources. Case study researchers collect and analyze multiple sources of evidence to increase the rigor of the study and ensure credibility (Morse, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). Methodological triangulation enriches the researcher's ability to understand, interpret, and analyze the research data (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). For qualitative research, the within-method of methodological triangulation is appropriate and helps offer rich data, confirm the findings, provide more validity, and increase the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Methodological triangulation involves the use of multiple sources to gather the data to enhance the reliability of the results and achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Birt et al. (2016), member checking enables triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods to provide a clear understanding of the data and allows for accuracy in the interpretation of it. I employed methodological triangulation in the analysis of the data by collecting data from interviews as well as document review; documenting the collected data; employing member checking by allowing the participants to review my documentation and interpretation of their answers to the interview questions; and analyzing the data.

According to Moustakas (1994), researchers use a six-step data analysis process to decode and interpret information collected from participants. In this six-step process,

the researcher should list and group the data collected from all the participants, consider all data before the reduction and elimination of data, group the data by research questions, formulate the data into themes that identify common elements, construct an individual textual description of the experience, and present the data findings (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QADS) allows the researcher to code the data efficiently for more effective and accurate analysis (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015). NVivo is a QADS software that made it easy for me to code and analyzes the data yielding common themes. I used NVivo software to code and analyze the research data to help answer the research question, what strategies do some multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations? The purpose of this qualitative research study is to identify themes relating to the factors contributing to multilevel marketers successfully building and retaining a productive downline. Cantillon (1755/2015) noted that entrepreneurs must exhibit certain character traits and attributes, while exercising good judgment and innovativeness, under conditions of uncertainties, for profitability and sustainability. As I analyzed the data and themes emerged, I continued triangulation using data from the literature review and Cantillon's conceptual framework. This process allowed me to conclude about the research question and problem of what strategies some multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity form the foundation to evaluate the quality of a case study research (Yin, 2014). Qualitative research must be complete, thorough, credible,

dependable, conformable, and transferable to help ensure that the research is reliable, valid, and trustworthy (Cronin, 2014; Singh, 2014). Reliability (how consistently analytical procedures are applied) and validity (how precisely and accurately the findings reflect the data) are two strategies adopted by qualitative researchers to enhance the credibility of the study (Noble & Smith, 2015). In the next headings, I elucidated aspects of reliability and validity, and the impact they have to ensure the dependability of the study.

Reliability

Reliability of the study involves assessing the soundness of the research and the integrity of the conclusions formed (Noble & Smith, 2015). A complimentary attribute to reliability is dependability, which is the ability to produce data that is trustworthy and therefore more acceptable (Hilal, Afifi, Hilali, & Ouzzif, 2013). To increase dependability of the study, the researcher must: (a) justify the sample size, (b) present a study that can be replicated, (c) clearly state the research process, (d) address biases that may influence the findings, and (e) openly articulate the findings. In addition, the researcher should incorporate consistent standards, while remaining flexible as it relates to any unique challenges associated with the research (Funder et al., 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015). To proliferate the dependability of the data, the researcher should perform member checking by confirming with the participants that the researcher's transcripts and interpretation of the data were accurate (Harvey, 2015).

To minimize biases and errors in the study and to ensure that I remain objective and dependable, I made certain that the participants voluntarily joined the study. Then, I

executed the research procedures as planned. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) posited that the reliability of qualitative research is dependent on the researcher consistently executing the research procedures. Therefore, I asked each participant the same questions in the same order. In addition, the participants had an opportunity to review the data collected to confirm that I accurately documented and interpreted it. Birt et al. (2016) referred to this form of participant validation as member checking.

Validity

Validity represents how accurately the research data depicts the participant's stated reality (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity contribute to the validity of the qualitative research study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Similarly, Houghton et al. (2013) stated that credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are the criteria that researchers use to establish the rigor of a qualitative study. Trustworthiness of the findings helps establish credibility (Houghton et al., 2013). Methodological triangulation increases the trustworthiness of the data results and member checking improves the validity (Houghton et al., 2013). Noble and Smith (2015) concurred in stating that to ensure credibility, qualitative researchers should incorporate methodological strategies, including acknowledging and addressing biases that may influence the data collection and analysis; keeping scrupulous records and audit trail regarding data interpretation; comparing the responses from participants and presenting differing perspectives; and demonstrating clear thought process as the data is being analyzed. I used methodological triangulation and member checking to increase the credibility of my study.

Transferability refers to whether the findings of the current study are transferable to a similar situation without losing its meaning and the researcher achieves this by providing a detailed description of the case (Baillie et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). Noble and Smith (2015) noted that transferability refers to the generalizability and applicability of the data to other settings, contexts, and groups. Cope (2014) proposed that transferability occurs when non-participants of the study relate the study results with their personal experiences. To ensure transferability of the findings, I included clear descriptions of the findings.

Cope (2014) and Houghton et al. (2013) posited that researchers could use reflective journals to capture decisions they made, and challenges faced, as well as to help prevent bias. I used reflective journals to help increase conformability and dependability. Confirmability relates to the objectivity and accuracy of the data and dependability relates to the reliability of the data (Houghton et al., 2013; Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Using NVivo, I developed themes and word frequencies, which allows for confirmability of data. Confirmability, also referred to as neutrality, occurs once the researcher has addressed validity, consistency, reliability, and transferability (Noble & Smith, 2015). I addressed all these elements as noted above.

Data saturation occurs when the participants fail to provide any new information (Marshall et al., 2013). Fusch and Ness (2015) noted that the researcher not reaching data saturation jeopardizes the quality and validity of the work. Therefore, the researcher should keep sampling and collect data until no new patterns emerge (Schauer,

Vasconcelos, & Sen, 2015). I continued to interview until the participants failed to present any new information during data collection.

Transition and Summary

In section 2, I restated the study's purpose, explained the role of the researcher, and described the participants. I also discussed the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments and techniques, data organization and analysis, as well as the reliability and validity of the data. All these components are vital to the success of this qualitative research study and aid in solidifying the results. Section 3 contains research findings, reflections on the study outcomes, and recommendations for further study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operation. The study's participants consisted of three multilevel marketers from three separate multilevel marketing companies who have an operation based in New York. Each of the study's participants had more than 10 years of experience in multilevel marketing and earned revenues exceeding \$100,000 for at least 2 of those years. Two of the three participants well surpassed this income criterion. I conducted this study because of the substantial number of individuals who become multilevel marketers, lose money, and quit within the first year. The conceptual framework of this study was the entrepreneurship theory (Cantillon 1755/2015).

I conducted three semistructured interviews, one face-to-face and two by Zoom, and I used the interview protocol (see Appendix A) as a guide for the interview process. Before the interviews, each participant reviewed and signed the consent form. The participants answered 10 open-ended questions as part of their interviews (see Appendix B). I reviewed training documents and videos provided by the participants. To avoid identifying the participants and ensure confidentiality of the data they provided, I assigned each participant a code that I used to distinguish them. The codes used were P1, P2, and P3. In the subsequent sections, I include (a) a presentation of the findings, (b) a discussion of applications to professional practice, (c) a discussion of implications for

social change, (d) recommendations for action, (e) recommendations for further study, (f) reflections, and (g) the conclusion.

Presentation of Findings

The overarching research question for this study was this: What strategies do multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operation? After recording the interviews, transcribing them, conducting member checking, and reviewing training documents and videos, I used the NVivo 11 analysis software to code the data and classify them into topical themes. I identified three central themes: (a) entrepreneurial mindset, (b) strong leadership and support, and (c) training and development. The responses provided by the participants to the interview questions were consistent with the literature review findings and the conceptual framework, which was Cantillon's entrepreneurship theory. I discuss each of the identified themes in the following sections.

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial Mindset

Throughout the interviews with the participants, P1, P2, and P3 continued to express that individuals must possess a certain mindset and have specific skills and attributes to be successful in the multilevel marketing industry. Entrepreneurial mindset is defined as how psychological variables and personality traits influence the outcomes of an entrepreneur (Davis, Hall, & Mayer, 2016). P1 noted that there are specific entrepreneurial skills that individuals must have to be successful in multilevel marketing. While P2 and P3 did not explicitly use the word skills, they did discuss some of the actual personality traits and skills mentioned by Davis et al. (2016). Table 1 below shows some

of the personality traits and skills indicated by Davis et al. (2016) and identifies the ones that each of the three participants mentioned.

Table 1

Personality Traits and Skills Evident from Participants' Responses

	Personality Traits & Skills	P1	P2	P3
1	Need to achieve	✓	✓	✓
2	Action-oriented	✓	✓	✓
3	Risk Acceptance	✓		✓
4	Passion	✓		✓
5	Independence	✓		
6	Persistence	✓	✓	✓
7	Optimism	✓	✓	✓
8	Goal-setting	✓	✓	✓
9	Self-confidence	✓	✓	✓
10	Interpersonal Sensitivity	✓	✓	✓

Need to Achieve. The participants expressed that to be successful in multilevel marketing, individuals must desire more out of life, want to change their current circumstances, and be willing to do what it takes to succeed. The general observation was that all three participants (P1, P2, and P3) had a desire and will to win. Desire, which is the need to achieve and be successful, and then passing that same desire on to one's downline, supports building and retaining a productive downline. P1 stated that,

“some people are contented while others desire more in life. The ones who do well in network marketing are those who want more out of life. They have the entrepreneurial spirit.”

When asked about the characteristics of a successful multilevel marketer, P2 mentioned that desire is a key attribute along with the want to change their current situation and doing what it takes to be successful. P3 similarly stated that people who have the will and the burning desire for change and is willing to put in the work are great additions to the team. The study participants reinforced the findings of Li et al. (2016), who concluded that a successful multilevel marketer must be results-oriented.

Action-Oriented. An action-oriented person is ready and willing to execute on a plan of action that solves a problem. P1 posited that nothing happens until you act, the results and the money all come from action, and that you are not paid based on what you know but rather based on what you do. P2 mentioned that one of the things that cause new multilevel marketers to be unsuccessful is failing to take action. The study participants corroborated the findings of Lee and Tamraker (2018), who asserted that the potential for failure increases when the vision is not shared and made actionable. Taking action such as setting goals, developing strategies, and executing plans, leads to entrepreneurial success (Chatterjee & Das, 2015).

Risk Acceptance. Starting a new business is risky; therefore, entrepreneurs are considered risk takers (Block, Sandner, & Spiegel, 2015). Similarly, multilevel marketers must be prepared to accept some level of risk as they pursue this venture. When asked about the characteristics of a successful multilevel marketer, P3 indicated that they must

take on responsibility and risk and P1 concurred that they are risk takers. P1 also noted that many multilevel marketers fail because they lack the capacity for risk and therefore quit too soon. P1 and P3 affirmed the findings of Siahaan et al. (2014), who concluded that when multilevel marketers develop the competence for risk-taking, they are most successful. This component of the theme also connected to new research by Clark (2016), who asserted that risk-taking and risk tolerance are fundamental to the practice of entrepreneurship.

Passion. Cardon, Post, and Forster (2017) defined passion as a positive emotion so intense that it evokes a connection between meaningful work and personal identity. Without passion, the work or activity seems meaningless and not worth pursuing. P1 shared that the most significant benefit of being a successful multilevel marketer is that you get to do what you love most, whatever that is, without having to worry about money. P1 further stated that being successful in multilevel marketing allows for financial and time freedom. Therefore, individuals must allow that passion to drive them to keep going until they reach their desired outcome.

Team entrepreneurial passion has a significant effect on the outcome of the team as well as on individual outcome (Cardon et al., 2017). The idea of a downline implies strong teamwork and drawing from each other's strengths and accomplishments to influence positive mindset and results. P3 helps downlines set goals and highlights their achievements in front of the team when they meet their goals. P3 praises them for working hard, and they have a friendly competition with each other. P3 keeps the team together on GroupMe and they get to collaborate and stay motivated, which increases

their passion for the business. This collaboration is the reason P3 says you are in business for yourself, but not by yourself.

Independence. Independent thinkers have a keen sense of initiative and implement new ideas (Ahmad, 2015). According to Ceptureanu (2015), having a level of independence makes entrepreneurs more consistent and driven to succeed. P1's responses were consistent with the findings of Uusi-Kakkuri et al. (2016), who reported that independence is a necessary trait for successful multilevel. When asked what attributes new distributors must possess have, P1 said:

I focus on finding business builders, not just customers. I am very effective in this. I am one of the top distributors in the company now. I maximize the use of my time by spending it on business builders, not just customers. I am looking for people who have a background or experience in network marketing because they already have their connections, they have the skills, and you don't have to train them as much. They are like eagles; they fly along, and they know what to do. I'm okay if they even think they are smarter than me. I have a downline like that. I recruited her, and I have earned millions of dollars from her production without me doing anything. She is a go-getter. She is the same rank as me. She would ask in her presentations and training, "Did you have to help me build P1?" And I would answer no. And we like that because she is training her downline not to be dependent on her. So that independent mindset is critical.

Persistence. Freeland and Keister (2016) reported that many ventures are unsuccessful because they fail to be persistent. Freeland and Keister (2016) continued to indicate that if many of business owners who permanently closed their doors had persisted, they would have been still in business. P3 concurred by stating that multilevel marketers should “understand that it will take time. It is not going to happen overnight. You just have to keep building until things come around for you.” Three times during the interview, P2 spoke about the importance of not quitting. P2 said:

Don't quit before you put in the time. Also, it's important not to let a certain level of success get to your head. I see people get a level of success, being on magazines and being recognized and then they stop doing what they were doing. Don't quit doing what has made you successful. I consider my other two network marketing stints as stepping stones. Learn a lot and move on if you must but don't quit. I think this is an incredible industry and you can be successful if you work hard regardless of education or background.

When speaking of characteristics of a successful multilevel marketer as well as what not to do, P1 mentioned the following:

They don't give up easily. Do not quit. Research and make sure you are on the right path. Then don't quit. I have seen so many leaders who quit and their downline continued, so they missed millions of dollars. I can think of five leaders who did this.

The study participants corroborated the findings of Uusi-Kakkuri et al. (2016), who indicated that persistence is a necessary attribute for the success of innovators in the marketplace.

Optimism. Chen, Zhou, Yang, Bao, and Wang (2017) defined entrepreneurial optimism as the individual's expectations for a positive outcome and has a significant impact on social network size and the performance of new. Multilevel marketers may find it difficult to be optimistic about a positive outcome for themselves without (a) a level of respect for the industry, (b) confidence in the multilevel marketing company and its leadership, (c) knowledge of and belief in the products and services they market, and (d) a compensation plan that meets their desires. P1 addressed all aspects listed to support optimism of positive results. P1 stated that:

Positive thinking is very important. You can see that in people right away who is positive versus those who are negative and critical. Also, if those people you recruit at home do not come to an event, they don't see the big picture of the company. They have to watch the energy of the other people who already made it, the other successful people. An event is like a bonfire. You could put a log on a bonfire and it will burn. So, if you keep them coming to events, they see the big picture, they see the success of other people, they keep on believing that the opportunity is real and that they could be one of those people who are on the stage. Without going to the event, they don't have that vision. They don't see the vision of what could be. They think they could not make money from the opportunity.

That's a very weak vision of network marketing. Also, if you happen to be in the wrong company, you are just wasting your time. The company has to be financially stable and proven.

P3 addressed the lack of respect for the multilevel marketing industry and shared that:

Sometimes you have people who were successful before joining network marketing but can't do anything much in this industry because their level of respect for the industry is minimal and what they are willing to give to the industry is limited and therefore will not turn into massive success for them.

P2 addressed confidence in the company by stating that the company has a lot to do with it. P2 said you must be with the right company at the right time.

Goal-Setting. Goals serve to keep entrepreneurs motivated toward higher performance, venture growth, innovation, and ultimately business success (Laguna, Alessandri, & Caprara, 2016). De Souza, Dos Santos, Lima, Da Cruz, and Lezana (2016) concluded that setting business goals leads to greater entrepreneurial potential and business success. All three study participants (P1, P2, and P3) expressed how vital goal-setting is to multilevel marketing success. P3 helps team members set goals and applaud them in front of the rest of the team for meeting their goals. P2 indicated that setting goals is essential and that new multilevel marketers should not move forward before setting realistic goals and their upline will work with them to do that. P1 teaches downline multilevel marketers how to set goals and noted that the successful multilevel marketers are those who are ruthless in pursuing their goals. P3 shared that without goals,

people tend to become complacent. The participants validated the findings of Košnarová (2013), who concluded that effective leaders help their distributors to set goals and create a strategy to achieve them and Li et al. (2016), who noted that goal setting is a competency mandatory for success.

Self-Confidence. Self-Confidence is an individual's assurance in their ability to complete a role or task (Navis & Ozbek, 2017). P1, P2, and P3 all said that you must believe in yourself to successfully build a thriving multilevel business and downline. When asked about the barriers faced when recruiting downline multilevel marketers, P2 indicated that there are so many people who do not believe they have what it takes to make money in multilevel marketing or any business venture. According to P1, the people who are successful in multilevel marketing are self-motivated people and they believe that they could be one of those people who are on the stage receiving recognition for their accomplishments. The study participants confirmed the findings of Uusi-Kakkuri et al. (2016), who concluded that company decision-makers must possess self-confidence as an attribute for success.

Interpersonal Sensitivity. Interpersonal Sensitivity is a strong level of consideration and thoughtfulness toward those with whom one works (Davis et al., 2016). Interpersonal sensitivity is especially important in businesses with multiple partners (Davis et al., 2016). Although each multilevel marketer is an independent contractor, team building is a key factor for success and therefore interpersonal sensitivity comes into play. Interpersonal sensitivity encompasses people and relationship-building skills and maintaining a healthy balance in those relationships (Wedgeworth, LaRocca, Scogin,

& Chaplin, 2017). Marketing and sales practices rely heavily on relationship building (Gerlach, Rödiger, Stock, & Zacharias, 2016). Having a great relationship with co-workers is a priority and enables the parties involved to trust each other, appreciate each other, and respect each other (Gerlach et al., 2016). Multilevel marketing consists of dealing with people not only on the customer level but also on the “co-worker” level as you build a downline and work together for each other’s success. Each participant noted that it’s essential to be a people-person if you are going to build a strong, active downline and be successful in multilevel marketing. When asked how does having a downline contribute to the success of your multilevel marketing business, all three participants said having a productive downline is everything. P3 stated:

Building a downline is like creating a bunch of franchises and you get a percentage of everything everyone does. You can think of it as something like a real estate broker or wall street trader that has a team. It’s the same time of situation. It definitely helps to enhance your income. It gives you a presence in multilevel markets and it helps your business grow faster. It’s fun especially when you have the right people around you. You have to be able to work with others, and give to others, and focus on others while you are focusing on yourself. If you only focus on yourself and try to use people instead of trying to build people up and authentically going out there and trying to help people, you are going to hit a roadblock. You have to be a leader. You have to take on responsibility and risks and serve your leaders and your customers. I changed my recruitment strategy as I went

along and learned. What I realize now is that it's about people. It's about how best can you help other people become better. My main recruitment strategy is to listen first – listen to how well I can enhance your life with this opportunity or with one of our products and services. I listen first and then offer the opportunity to hear what I have to offer. I do this in my everyday life. I do it everywhere I go. I could be at the laundromat, I could be at the schoolyard picking up my children, I could be at the gym, I could be at a family function, it does not matter where I am, I have conversations with people. I don't share the opportunity at that point. I take mental notes, exchange contact information, and later on reach out to them.

P2 shared some of the same sentiments as P3 and noted:

In this industry having a whole lot of people on your team working and a whole lot of people making money is key. I realized early on that I wanted to be a big-time player in this industry, I would need to build a large team. I focus on helping people get promoted, make money, and win contests. Successful multilevel marketers are people-people. They must be outgoing. I meet new people all the time. I am an outgoing person, so I am always talking to people and making new contacts – if I go to a restaurant, if I go to a grocery store, anywhere I go, I am always starting a conversation with someone. If you are willing to ask a few questions, people will tell you about themselves and ask you what you do. That gives you an opportunity to share with them. Be interested in what people do

and they will also ask you what you do. Go where people are – the grocery store, church - interact with people and strike up a conversation. People fail because they are not showing the plan to enough people. This is a people business, so it's important to talk to as many people as possible to invite them to take a look at this opportunity. Building strong relationships has a lot to do with it too, not just in the business but become friends, spend time together, have parties, have picnics and other activities together. It's a challenge if someone does not want to do those things, then they don't have what it takes to be successful and their business probably will not grow.

Like participants P2 and P3, participant P1 stressed the importance of developing relationships. Here is what P1 said:

They are people-people. They can create good relationships with other people. Some people I tell them that if they have a problem relating to people, I ask them to read the book "How to win friends and influence people." If you are not friendly, you cannot be in this business; you are not going to make it. That's a fundamental thing.

In reviewing the training videos provided by P1, the observation was that the trainers mentioned seven of the ten personality traits and skills noted in Table 1 as being important for success. In Table 2, I show the personality traits and skills noted in Table 1 and the corresponding ones mentioned in the training videos provided by P1.

Table 2

Personality Traits and Skills from Table 1 and Corresponding Traits from P1 Training Videos

	Personality Traits & Skills	Corresponding Traits from P1 Training Videos
1	Need to achieve	<i>Desire and Having a Winning Attitude</i>
2	Action-oriented	<i>Taking Action</i>
3	Risk Acceptance	
4	Passion	<i>Excitement</i>
5	Independence	
6	Persistence	<i>Commitment, Focus, Patience, No Quit Attitude, Consistency, and Remaining Involved and Engaged.</i>
7	Optimism	<i>Belief</i>
8	Goal-setting	<i>Goal-oriented and Having and Implementing a Solid Game Plan</i>
9	Self-confidence	<i>Understanding Your Potential and Positive Self-Image</i>
10	Interpersonal Sensitivity	

A review of the results as shown in Table 2 indicates that the trainers in P1 training videos placed no emphasis on risk acceptance, independence, and interpersonal sensitivity; some emphasis on action-oriented, passion, and optimism; great emphasis on need to achieve, goal-setting, and self-confidence; and greatest emphasis on persistence. To further stress the importance of persistence, the trainer in P1 training videos stressed that it is important that distributors remember that this business is no different from other businesses in that it takes time to build and distributors must be willing to give it time to evolve and grow. Consequently, the only personality trait and skill highlighted in the training material and videos reviewed from P2 and P3 was persistence. One of the words

used in the P1 training videos to emphasize the persistence trait is commitment, which Siahaan et al. (2014) defined in their study findings as the belief and emotional bond that drives dedication to the task.

Correlation to the conceptual framework. Four of Cantillon's (1755/2015) constructs in the entrepreneurship theory, profitability, uncertainty, innovation, and good judgment emerged in the analysis of the data collected from the study participants. The need for achievement and desire for change personality traits both link to Cantillon's (1755/2015) view on profitability as a motivating factor for entrepreneurial, including multilevel marketing, success. In the face of uncertainty, a construct in Cantillon's (1755/2015) theory of entrepreneurship, risk-acceptance is vital for multilevel marketing success. In the study findings of Uusi-Kakkuri et al. (2016), innovation, another of Cantillon's (1755/2015) entrepreneurship theory constructs, emerges as necessary when decision makers are seeking visibility and success in the marketplace. Uusi-Kakkuri et al. (2016) indicated that innovators are persistent, self-confident, and independent, three of the personality traits highlighted by the study participants as necessary for multilevel marketers who want to build and sustain a productive downline and business.

Cantillon (1755/2015) noted that good judgment is necessary for an entrepreneur to experience profitability and sustainability. As it relates to interpersonal sensitivity and people and relationship building, multilevel marketing entrepreneurs must exercise good judgment as they seek to manage their relationships. Working together as a team allows for free flow of communication and enhanced communication opens up the propensity for increased growth, which ultimately leads to greater sustainability. Good judgment comes

with experience. According to research findings from Omar (2014), the lack of proper communication surfaces when the distributor is not very experienced. Therefore, as multilevel marketers become more experienced, they would be able to exercise good judgment in their relationship building and communication, which will attract potential customers to purchase and become long-term customers and distributors.

Theme 2: Strong Leadership and Support

Leadership involves creating a vision, building trust in a team, and having them come together to execute the planned process for success (Karol, 2015). Karol (2015) further expressed that leaders create the right culture and environment through encouragement and support that allows the persons they lead to succeed over time. Some qualities of strong leadership include perseverance, bold risk-taking, and a keen emphasis on measuring results (Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016). These qualities are in line with some of the personality traits and skills listed in Theme 1. The participants in this study confirmed the significance of strong leadership and support as a strategy to build and retain a productive downline.

P3 made it clear that to be successful in multilevel marketing, you have to be a leader, you have to take on responsibility and risks, and you have to serve and help develop your downline leaders and your customers. P3 further noted the following duties as a leader:

I help them set up home meetings. I have them do four home meetings in the first 30 days. Home meetings are presentations done in the home where multilevel marketers showcase the opportunity itself and products

and services, where another leader or I will present. Because new multilevel marketers don't have enough information or experience yet to do presentations themselves, they just introduce us as leaders and we present the opportunity for them. Also, I provide three-way calls with prospects for my team members. I provide general support – how to do, how to find, etc. People stick around when they know you are there supporting them. You have to be able to duplicate yourself, so you are building other leaders.

P2 informed that as a leader, you have to set the pace. P2 focuses on being a great leader to his team and stated that:

People are looking to you to see what's possible. Become that leader that people are looking for and can look up to. Set the pace. The leader of the pack sets the pace. If people see you working hard and doing great things, they would be inspired to do the same. You attract who you are. Lead by example. People work hard when they see you working hard.

P1 shared that each multilevel marketer must think of themselves as the leaders they are or have to become. P1 also stated that to build and retain a productive downline, you must show leadership to that group, you must train them, motivate them, inspire them, coordinate them, and influence them to grow bigger. As a result of the large worldwide team P1 has, the role P1 plays differs. P1 no longer does product and opportunity presentations, but instead, travels to do mindset training for team members. P1 mentioned that multilevel marketing distributors look up to people who personify

what they can be in the future and so as a leader, P1 continues to be that person that they can be proud of and seek to emulate. P1 said that if you can duplicate yourself, your business will continue to grow exponentially. According to P1, leadership can be detrimental to the success or failure of a multilevel marketer. P1 stated that you need good leadership for guidance and direction, but you also must be a great leader to your team. P1 further indicated that multilevel marketers can learn leadership and motivation is a huge part of being a multilevel marketing leader. P1 noted:

Everything could be taught including leadership, which is very important. Some people grew up with natural leadership qualities. Their classmates follow them. Still, someone who is quiet can learn leadership. I am kind of like that. In school, I was the last in everything, but when I got into network marketing, I believed I could learn everything, and so I had that willingness to learn and I did. You have to learn how to inspire and motivate them to keep on going because they will only work so far on their own. Many of them will quit if you don't know how to motivate them – you would just keep losing people and having to start over again. It's another skill to keep them motivated, so they stick to you as a leader. You want them to be like you, build their own group, and do the things you do. Besides motivation, there are four other areas of leadership: (1) vision – me as a leader, I have a vision, that's why I am a leader. I know where I am going. I know how I am going to get there. And I have to be able to transmit that vision to you and other people down the line. That

vision is very important. (2) Communication – that line of communication should be open. You are like soldiers in the desert. You get separated, you are dead. (3) Positioning – network marketing has become a global business now, so we drill into people that if you want to have a stable business, you have to have a downline all over the world, not just in your local area. Downline in different countries is very vital. If one country falls apart, you have a network in other countries. (4) Empowerment – you have to connect your downline to the tools available to them, so they feel empowered.

Correlation to the conceptual framework. Innovation and sustainability, two of Cantillon's (1755/2015) constructs, relate directly to the strong leadership and support theme. Innovative leaders are strong leaders who provide support to their downline. These leaders help manage the risk arising from uncertainties because they are organized and can anticipate and mitigate risk as it appears. In line with the findings of Košnarová (2013), multilevel marketing leaders must find innovative ways to plan and organize the structure, tasks, and activities of their downline and keep them motivated. These innovative leaders ensure that there is a system in place for their team to follow, they encourage working together as a team, they learn from experiences and develop the resilience to combat future challenges, and as a result experience greater profitability and sustainability.

Theme 3: Training and Development

Education and training are crucial to business success (Henning & Akoob, 2017). Shared learning increases effectiveness and innovation among entrepreneurs (Nieminen & Hytti, 2016). Many first-time multilevel marketers do not join the venture with any prior background in entrepreneurship and direct selling, and therefore, training is very critical to their development and success. Even when distributors have received some form of entrepreneurial training, the participants in this study noted that the multilevel marketing industry is a unique entrepreneurial endeavor and therefore, new multilevel marketers should learn and follow the success system.

P3 identified many areas of training necessary to promote multilevel marketing success and stated:

People don't understand that it's a numbers game. That is why you need to have mentors and read books. It is important to understand that everyone is not going to say yes. It is also essential to understand the ratios of who may say yes versus who may say no. One or two out of every 10 would join your business. So, if you understand that most people will not join, you know that there's nothing wrong with you, that's just the way the industry is. I train my team early on to understand that. I don't just throw them out there. I guide them along and walk them through the process. I can't stop what's going to happen, but I am that voice to let them know that this is to be expected. I do a lot of other training. I think training is the most important thing. As soon as you sign up and even during the registration process, I let them know we will be training. In the first 24

hours, I sit with them and create a game plan. I like for them to be successful as quickly as possible because the industry has a quick turnover rate and especially with the bombardment of social media, if you don't show people success, they are going to quit. So, in the beginning, I hold their hands and help them through the process. A lot of network marketers make the mistake that a successful person outside of the industry doesn't need the support and that they would know what to do. It's a different mindset; it's a different process; it's a different type of business period; so, you have to hold their hands. Outside the personal training, I have done boot camp training, where I show the fundamentals, customer acquisition, how to do a home meeting, how to prospect, team etiquette, how to present the opportunity, and how to get over the fear of getting up in front of the room and presenting. My training is in stages – first, how to be commissionable, how to get your first check, where do you go for company training, and customer acquisition. As you grow, then I teach how to present, and what they should be doing to develop their teams. You have to be able to duplicate yourself, so you are building leaders. As they grow even further, you teach more personal development, how to map out their teams and book of business, refer them to books, professional speaking, and other training. Also, I teach how to make the compensation plan best work for you, talk about what type of money they want to own and how to achieve it.

Similarly, P2 stressed the importance of training to the success of multilevel marketers and indicated:

People who follow the training, stay plugged into everything, watch what people who are successful do, and follow the path are the ones who tend to be most successful. The first thing that happens is that they receive a welcome email with a 17-minute basic training video giving them tips for success. I include my email and phone number, so they have direct contact with me. We also have team calls and web training. We have regional events where they learn more about the company, its leaders, and our offerings. We train weekly on how to gather customers. We record all those trainings and store on two websites, so reps can always go back and listen to them. We train on how to show the plan. We have a weekly six-step training on how to build the business and your team. We train on rules and regulations, for example, no door to door solicitation. People are unsuccessful because they are not coachable. They think they know everything and don't need the training probably because they have made sales before. They don't follow the success plan laid out for them and many times they fail.

P1 also felt that training is vital to the process of building and retaining a productive downline, which leads to success in multilevel marketing. P1 stated:

The company does more compliance training and other details on the website. Because of mass media now, videos from top leaders are what we

use for training. Every Saturday, we have two leaders who do teleconferences. They are well known in the company, so different teams listen to them. The train on products, the compensation plan, and mindset. I do mainly mindset training. Many fail because they do not give enough importance to self-development. Some are arrogant and think they know everything. You have limited knowledge and experience in what you are doing. What you do not know cannot help you. That's why you study. In my training, I propose books to read such as *The Magic of Thinking Big*; *The Greatest Salesman in the World*; *Think and Grow Rich*; *How to Win Friends and Influence People*; and *Tools for Titans* to name a few. You have to follow in the footsteps of successful people such as Jim Rohn, Anthony Robbins, and Zig Ziglar. One of the most successful people who teach how to build a large network and be a successful network marketer is Eric Worre. Learn from these people. Never stop learning.

According to the study participants, to build a productive downline and increase their chance of success, multilevel marketers must continue to grow their knowledge about the company they represent and its compensation plan, their upline or sideline leadership style, the products and services they provide, and in personal development. P1 stated that multilevel marketers' success hinges on good leadership, good product, and a good compensation plan. P1 stressed that leadership is very important because a person might be attached to a good product and a good compensation plan, but with the wrong leader who just wants to make himself rich, then that's a problem. Also, P1 indicated that

the company must be financially stable and proven. P2 trains new multilevel marketers to be proficient in knowing why they are doing this business, making a large and extensive written list of potential customers and business partners, and sorting through that list. In addition, P2 teaches his downline to find three-star business partners and help each them find their three stars, invite prospects to see the plan, and rely on their upline to help close their deals.

The training materials provided by P1, P2, and P3 all stressed the importance of training and development. P1 training videos emphasized that the distributors should seek to become knowledgeable about the company, its products and services, and the compensation plan as well as ensure that there is adequate training and support. P2 training material encourages distributors to learn their six-step process to success. With this six-step process, distributors learn why they are doing the business, make a large extensive contact list and work with their upline to sort through that list Through the six-step process, distributors learn to make the invitation brief, use videos and websites for presentation until they learn to present themselves, show the plan over and over, and rely on their upline to help them close a deal. P3 training video inspires distributors to build up their customer base by becoming their own customers first and then reaching out to friends and family, share the business presentation with as many people as possible, and continue to increase their knowledge by remaining steadfast in the learning process. P3 trainer stated that the more you learn, the more you earn.

Correlation to the conceptual framework. Innovative leaders recognize that their student followers learn in different ways and so they are always seeking creative

ways to train them and keep them motivated. Innovation is a construct introduced by Cantillon's (1755/2015) entrepreneurial theory. Learning comes from past experiences and therefore, part of the training that leaders pass on to their downline is how to exercise good judgment and develop some of the personality traits and skills they do not possess. According to the previous study findings of Li et al. (2016), multilevel marketers develop the personality traits and skills by formal education and training, and personal development through coaching, mentoring, and self-help material.

Applications to Professional Practice

I explored strategies that multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. I employed a multiple case study design to highlight the experiences of three successful multilevel marketers as defined by the criteria outlined for this study. Multilevel marketers may not be successful without having (a) entrepreneurial mindset, (b) strong leadership and support, and (c) training and development.

I applied Cantillon's (1755/2015) entrepreneurship theory as a guide for my research. The results of the study aligned with and reinforced the entrepreneurship theory. The study findings also supported Siahaan et al. (2014) argument that multilevel marketers who exhibit entrepreneurial competency, commitment, and motivation experience increased success. Incorporating the results of this study into their business model, multilevel marketers should develop the mindset to be more resilient entrepreneurs; become more people focused and embrace relationship building; seek out

supportive leaders to mentor them, while being the same type of leader to their downline; and make learning and personal development a part of their success strategy.

Multilevel marketers could use the findings of this study to develop a checklist of personality traits and skills that they should develop and implement in their businesses to build and sustain a productive downline and increase their potential for success. This checklist of personality traits and skills should include identifying the why in their need to achieve, being action-oriented, and being willing to accept the risks associated with entrepreneurship. This checklist also comprises being passionate about their business venture including the products and services they provide, embracing an independent spirit, and being persistent even through adversity. Lastly included in the checklist is remaining optimistic along the journey, setting goals and working toward them, and being confident in their abilities to achieve their set goals.

The outcomes of the data analysis revealed that these multilevel marketer participants focused not only on the personality traits and skills outlined in the preceding paragraph, but they also paid much attention to building trust and strong relationships with people they meet. In addition, the participants focused on becoming the type of leader that their downline would want to follow, and they continuously learn and grow personally and professionally. These strategies may lead multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline, which may translate to business growth and success within the first 5 years of operations. This information may contribute to professional practice if multilevel marketers gain additional knowledge and ideas on how to build and retain their downline, grow their businesses and yield profits.

Implications for Social Change

One of the fundamental purposes of multilevel marketing is to provide opportunities for devoted go-getters to introduce new products and services to consumers and occupations to those seeking employment (Hatchaleelaha & Wongsurawat, 2016). The potential social impact of this study is that the findings can create more opportunities for multilevel marketing business owners to have better chances of generating additional revenue in a sustainable business venture. Increasing the potential success of building and retaining a productive downline for multilevel marketers (a) produces an upsurge in the success rate of multilevel marketing businesses; (b) creates more thriving communities because individuals can generate more steady streams of income; and (c) reduces unemployment and expands revenue sources for local taxation, which leads to a more stable economy.

By utilizing the strategies from the findings of this study, multilevel marketers may contribute to positive social change by increasing the knowledge and skill set of future multilevel marketers and ultimately increasing the number of successful multilevel marketers in each community. Current and aspiring multilevel marketers can utilize the strategies from the findings of this study to grow their businesses and build their downlines. The increased success among multilevel marketers will improve the sustainability of multilevel marketing companies, reduce the incidences of unemployment, resulting in more taxable income and increased tax revenue, and have a concurrent positive effect on the economy in New York and beyond.

Recommendations for Action

The intent of my research was to explore the strategies that multilevel marketers with an operation based in New York use to build and retain a productive downline. Findings of this study provided evidence that the skillsets and personality traits associated with an entrepreneurial mindset, such as the need to achieve, being action-oriented, accepting risk, passion, independence, persistence, optimism, goal-setting, self-confidence, and interpersonal sensitivity, support the success of multilevel marketers. The findings detailed the strategies the study participants use to continue to build and retain a productive downline and sustain their business growth. In addition to the other skillsets and personality traits that accompany entrepreneurial mindset, interpersonal sensitivity helps multilevel marketers to establish solid relationships. The participants make relationship building an integral part of their multilevel marketing business strategy. Relationship building enables their potential customers and business partners to develop a level of trust in them that makes the customers and partners want to continue to do business with the participants.

Regarding the study participants in the multilevel marketing industry, receiving strong leadership and support from their uplines and then in turn providing strong leadership and support to their downlines, increases their chances for success. When multilevel marketers engage in continuous training and development, their performance and their team's performance improve (Bone, 2017). Therefore, I recommend that multilevel marketers implement these strategies to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations, thus sustaining their multilevel marketing

businesses. Multilevel marketers should also expose their recruits to these strategies very early in the process before they lose momentum and quit.

My goal is to publish the findings of this study to a broader audience. I intend to use several avenues to distribute the results of this study. Each of the participants in this study will receive a summary of the findings that they can share with peers and other multilevel marketers in their book of business. Additionally, I plan to submit a summary of this study and its findings to the following professional journals: *American Journal of Industrial and Business Management*, *International Journal of Business and Society*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *Small Business Institute Journal*, and *The International Review of Retail Distribution and Consumer Research*. Lastly, I will pursue opportunities to share the findings of this study with multilevel marketing team leaders at multilevel conferences, and other professional conferences throughout the United States and internationally.

Recommendations for Further Research

During this study, I focused on the strategies multilevel marketers used to build and retain a productive downline. The strategies identified in this study are essential to sustaining a successful and profitable multilevel marketing business. The results of the study echoed the opinions of study participants from three separate multilevel marketing businesses with operations based in New York. I recommend conducting a multiple case study design with multilevel marketers from other multilevel marketing businesses with operations based in different regions of the United States. Comprehensive investigations

can be performed to study what other strategies multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline. Additionally, researchers may utilize the findings from those multilevel marketers to compare and contrast to the data provided by the participants of this study and evaluate those findings as a collective to determine what insights the multilevel marketing industry at large can adopt.

Several factors affect the success of multilevel marketing businesses, and therefore there are opportunities for further research. Qualitative researchers can explore strategies for building and retaining a productive downline through another conceptual framework, such as relationship marketing (RM) theory or Porter's five forces model or combine one or more of those conceptual frameworks with the entrepreneurship theory to gather additional insights into the phenomenon. Future research can bridge the existing gap in literature and increase the knowledge, understanding, and skills of multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline, resulting in more successful and profitable multilevel marketing endeavors.

Reflections

As I reflected on the Walden University Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program and study process, I recognized how challenging but rewarding the experience has been. I completed my Master of Business Administration more than 10 years before entering the program, so I knew that it would take some time and effort to get reacclimated with the academic processes and especially the extensive research process that the doctoral program required. Despite the challenges I faced, the DBA

doctoral study process was an unforgettable enriching process that has strengthened my academic aptitude.

The findings of this study confirmed that a qualitative case study was an effective method for exploring the strategies multilevel marketers use for building and retaining a productive downline in the first 5 years of operations. I had the distinct privilege of interviewing three successful multilevel marketers from three separate multilevel marketing companies, who have operations based in New York. I gained significant insight that complemented my previous experience in the industry, coupled with the plethora of knowledge I obtained during my research on the subject matter.

Finding successful multilevel marketers who met the research criteria and were willing to take time away from their busy schedules for an interview was very difficult. Successful multilevel marketers are continually traveling to conduct meetings and training for their downline. However, once I found the appropriate participants and developed a relationship with them to ensure the smooth progress of the interview process, they willingly shared their knowledge and expertise.

I have experience in the multilevel marketing industry and because I was not successful at the first two endeavors I attempted, I wanted to explore the successful strategies to building and retaining a productive downline and ultimately a successful and profitable multilevel marketing business. However, because of my previous experience, I was cautious to set aside any biases during the data collection process. My role as the researcher also required that I presented the findings and recommendations in an organized, ethical, and objective manner, which was not an easy undertaking. I assumed

that after data collection, the remaining endeavor would be a simple and straightforward process. However, I quickly realized that successfully articulating the data generated required focus, commitment, and resolve. This doctoral process broadened my understanding, appreciation, and knowledge of strategies multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline. This doctoral study also expanded my aptitude for business growth and sustainability. This experience reinforced my commitment to entrepreneurship and my intent to re-engage in the multilevel marketing industry.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies multilevel marketers use to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. I interviewed three multilevel marketers using open-ended questions and recorded the conversations in person and using the zoom platform. All the participants were willing contributors who were multilevel marketers for at least 5 years, earned at least a six-figure income for at least two of the past 5 years, and had operations based in New York. The secondary data included training material and videos supplied by each of the participants. The data collection, analysis, and storage conformed to the requirements of the Institutional Review Board.

Findings from this study highlighted three emergent themes of strategies used by multilevel marketers to build and retain a productive downline during the first 5 years of operations. These themes are: (a) entrepreneurial mindset, including the associated personality traits and skills; (b) strong leadership and support – having a strong leader upline and being a strong leader to their downline; and (c) training and development –

continually learning about the industry, the company, the products and services, and emerging personally and professionally. Multilevel marketers who employ these strategies and train their downline in these areas can build and retain a productive downline, resulting in growth and sustainability of their multilevel marketing business.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Organization:

Interviewee:

of Years as a Multilevel Marketer:

1. Researcher provides introduction, brief overview of the study, and build rapport with participant
2. Researcher reviews and discusses the consent form and answer questions or concerns
3. Participant acknowledges consent signed via e-mail
4. Discuss privacy and confidentiality
5. Start the Recording
6. Ask Interview Questions in the order listed
7. Based on responses, ask additional questions if needed
8. End Interview Questions
9. Thank Participants for Participating in the Study
10. Provide Email and Phone Number(s) for interviewee to reach out with Follow-up Questions or Concerns
11. Inform interviewee of follow-up for member checking
12. End Protocol

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How does having a downline contribute to the success of your multilevel marketing business?
2. What are the characteristics of a multilevel marketer who successfully builds a productive downline?
3. How do you evaluate the potential success of new prospects to your downline?
4. How do you identify potential multilevel marketers for your downline and what recruitment strategies have you used to recruit them?
5. What communication strategies do you employ with potential and current multilevel marketers in your downline?
6. What barriers did you encounter as you recruited new multilevel marketers for your downline?
7. What sort of training do you provide new and existing multilevel marketers in your downline?
8. What causes new multilevel marketers to become unsuccessful?
9. How are you able to motivate multilevel marketers to continue with your downline?
10. What additional comments might you offer regarding creating a productive downline?