

**IMPACT OF STEALTH MARKETING ON CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND THE
MEDIATING ROLE OF WORD OF MOUTH: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
THE FOOD AND BEVERAGES INDUSTRY IN WESTERN
PROVINCE, SRI LANKA.**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of Stealth Marketing (SM) on Customer Engagement (CE) in the Food and Beverage Industry in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, focusing on the mediating role of Word of Mouth (WOM). The decline in the effectiveness of traditional marketing methods has driven businesses to adopt innovative approaches such as SM, which includes Viral Marketing, Celebrity Marketing, Brand Pushers, Bait-and-Tease Marketing, and Marketing through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The primary objective was to examine how SM techniques influence CE and how WOM acts as a mediator in this relationship. A deductive research approach was adopted with a quantitative methodology based on structured questionnaires administered to a sample of 384 customers in the food and beverage sector. The data were analyzed using regression, correlation, and mediation analyses to test the hypotheses related to SM, WOM, and CE. Key findings from the regression analysis indicate that Brand Pushers had a B value of 0.22, showing a strong positive effect on CE, whereas viral marketing had a B value of 0.15, demonstrating a significant impact on CE. WOM had a mediating effect with a value of 0.099, amplifying the influence of SM on CE. These values demonstrate that Viral Marketing and Brand Pushers are particularly effective in driving CE, while WOM plays a crucial role as a mediator, enhancing the overall impact of SM strategies. The study recommends that businesses in the food and beverage industry leverage SM strategies, particularly Viral Marketing and Brand Pushers, to effectively engage customers. Furthermore, efforts to encourage positive WOM should be prioritized to maximize the benefits of SM campaigns. The findings derived from customer satisfaction and perceived value amplify the impact of stealth marketing on customer engagement. Future research should explore the applicability of these findings to other industries and regions.

Keywords: Stealth marketing, customer engagement, word of mouth, food and beverages industry, western province in Sri Lanka