

## Review Article

# Business Incubators and Start-Up Marketing Success: A Conceptual Exploration from North-Eastern Nigeria

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Business incubators are essential drivers of entrepreneurial development, particularly in emerging economies where new ventures face complex challenges. In North-eastern Nigeria, insecurity, weak infrastructure, and limited market access make it especially difficult for start-ups to grow and survive. Within this context, business incubators play a crucial role in supporting entrepreneurs. However, while their contributions to financing and mentorship have been widely discussed, their role in strengthening marketing capabilities is often overlooked. This conceptual paper explores the marketing-oriented contributions of incubators to start-up success in North-eastern Nigeria. Anchored in theoretical frameworks such as the Resource-Based View (RBV), Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT), and Network Theory, the study investigates how incubators facilitate essential marketing functions. These include market research, branding, customer relationship management, and digital marketing—factors critical to a venture's ability to engage and retain customers in competitive and unstable markets. Drawing from case insights and existing incubator models across the region and Africa, the paper identifies gaps in current support systems. Many incubators emphasize technical or financial support while neglecting marketing skills development. Furthermore, poor digital infrastructure, limited marketing expertise, and regional insecurity pose barriers to adopting effective marketing strategies. The paper proposes targeted interventions to enhance marketing support within incubator programs. These include introducing digital marketing training, developing marketing mentorship networks, and advocating for policy support to improve digital access and tools. Such strategic improvements can empower incubated start-ups to position themselves better in the market and achieve long-term sustainability. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of context-specific marketing interventions in business incubation. Enhancing marketing capabilities through incubators is vital for building resilient enterprises and fostering inclusive economic growth in resource-constrained and conflict-affected regions like North-eastern Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Business Incubators; Start-Up Development; Marketing Strategies; North-Eastern Nigeria; Entrepreneurial Ecosystems; Digital Marketing; Innovation Support

**Introduction**

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a powerful engine for economic growth, innovation, and job creation, especially in developing and transitional economies [1,2]. It empowers individuals to create value, solve local problems, and stimulate broader economic development. Start-ups, often characterized by their innovation and agility, serve as the bedrock of entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, despite their importance, start-ups are inherently vulnerable in their formative years. Numerous empirical studies have documented their high failure rates, commonly attributed to limited access to capital, weak infrastructure, inadequate mentorship, and insufficient market knowledge [3]. These challenges are particularly pronounced in low-income regions where business environments are frequently underdeveloped. Business incubators have emerged as critical intermediaries to bridge these systemic gaps by offering

structured support environments that enhance start-up resilience and performance [4,5,6]. These incubators provide a wide array of services such as office space, seed funding, business training, networking opportunities, and, crucially, marketing support. Their role in de-risking entrepreneurial ventures makes them an indispensable part of the entrepreneurial support system, especially in volatile regions. In the case of Northeastern Nigeria—comprising states like Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe, Bauchi, and Taraba—the significance of business incubators takes on a heightened meaning. The region has been plagued by a confluence of socio-economic challenges including persistent insecurity due to insurgency, high youth unemployment, limited access to formal education, and poor digital infrastructure [7,8]. These structural impediments have not only suppressed entrepreneurial dynamism but have also weakened the foundational

conditions needed for market-based economic recovery and social cohesion. In such contexts, business incubators act not just as business support units but as instruments for peacebuilding and inclusive development [9,10].

This paper aims to explore how business incubators contribute to start-up success from a marketing perspective, a dimension that is often under-explored in entrepreneurial research. Marketing is indispensable to the life cycle of a business—it affects how businesses position themselves, engage with customers, build brands, and respond to competitive threats [11,12]. For start-ups in Northeastern Nigeria, marketing presents an even greater challenge due to limited exposure to formal marketing education, insufficient access to marketing technologies, and cultural-linguistic barriers that complicate audience targeting.

By drawing from conceptual models such as the Resource-Based View (RBV), Network Theory, and Innovation Diffusion Theory, the paper situates business incubators within a broader theoretical and regional framework. It also proposes a strategic pathway to leverage incubator-led marketing support as a catalyst for sustainable entrepreneurship and regional development.

Ultimately, the findings and discussions in this paper will contribute to the academic discourse on entrepreneurial ecosystem development and offer practical insights for policymakers, development partners, and incubator managers seeking to foster a more vibrant and resilient start-up culture in Nigeria and similar emerging contexts.

## Literature Review

### Business Incubators: Definition and Evolution

Business incubators are institutions that support new and early-stage enterprises through a combination of services, including office space, technical assistance, mentorship, and access to funding and markets [6,13]. Originating in the United States in the 1950s, incubators have evolved globally to address a variety of developmental goals such as employment creation, technology commercialization, and regional development.

Incubators can be categorized into different types based on their focus: university-based, private, government-sponsored, and non-profit incubators. Each of these models has distinct structures and goals but shares a common purpose: to reduce the failure rate of new ventures by offering comprehensive business support [14].

### Start-Up Challenges in Developing Economies

Start-ups in developing economies often operate in challenging environments marked by unstable macroeconomic conditions, limited infrastructure, and weak institutional support [3]. In particular, entrepreneurs in North-eastern Nigeria face compounded challenges due to the insurgency and general insecurity that have hindered access to markets and investor confidence [7].

Moreover, start-ups typically lack strategic marketing capabilities, limiting their ability to develop brand awareness, conduct market research, or establish customer relationships [11,12]. These gaps make the marketing support offered by incubators not just useful, but vital.

### Marketing as a Critical Incubator Function

Marketing support provided by incubators encompasses training, access to advertising platforms, branding assistance, and networking opportunities [15,16]. Incubators often organize workshops, networking events, and demo days that allow start-ups to test their value propositions and build visibility [17].

Research shows that marketing-related support has a strong influence on start-up performance, particularly in customer acquisition and brand development. For instance, McAdam and Marlow (2007) found that incubated firms with structured marketing mentorship reported higher customer growth than non-incubated counterparts.

### Empirical Evidence from Other Regions

In Latin America and Southeast Asia, incubators have been instrumental in helping start-ups overcome structural marketing constraints by providing training in digital tools, facilitating participation in trade fairs, and connecting them with export markets. Similar outcomes were reported in Kenya and South Africa, where start-ups benefited from branding workshops and customer analytics programs offered by incubators.

Though few studies focus on Nigeria, available evidence indicates that hubs like the Co-Creation Hub (Lagos) and the North-East Humanitarian Innovation Hub (Yola) have positively impacted start-up visibility and access to consumer markets [8,18]. These findings underscore the need for tailored incubation models that prioritize marketing functions in line with local market dynamics.

This literature review establishes a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for analyzing how incubators in Northeastern Nigeria support start-up marketing. The next section presents the conceptual framework that guides this study.

## Business Incubators in North-eastern Nigeria

### Regional Overview

Northeastern Nigeria, encompassing the states of Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe, Bauchi, and Taraba, is a region marked by considerable socio-economic challenges that impact its entrepreneurial ecosystem [7]. The area has endured prolonged security threats largely due to insurgency and communal conflicts, which have disrupted economic activities and displaced millions [8]. Consequently, infrastructure development in sectors such as electricity, transportation, and digital connectivity remains inadequate, constraining business operations and market access.

Youth unemployment rates in Northeastern Nigeria are among the highest nationally, with estimates exceeding 40% in some states (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This demographic trend, coupled with low levels of industrialization, has led to a significant portion of the population turning to informal entrepreneurship as a survival strategy (Ojo & Yusuf, 2019). However, many of these informal ventures lack formal training, access to finance, and strategic marketing capabilities, which limits their growth and sustainability [1].

Against this backdrop, business incubators have emerged as essential institutions to nurture entrepreneurship, particularly start-

ups, by providing critical resources that overcome regional constraints [8]. These incubators are positioned to address market failures by offering structured environments for start-ups to innovate, test ideas, and gain market insights (Bruneel, Ratinho, Clarysse, & Groen, 2012). Moreover, incubators in this region have the potential to contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion by engaging youth in productive economic activities [7].

### Existing Incubator Models

Several incubators and innovation hubs have been established in Northeastern Nigeria to stimulate entrepreneurial activity despite the region's challenges. Notable among these is the North-East Humanitarian Innovation Hub (NEHIH) in Yola, which focuses on leveraging technology to address humanitarian and development challenges [18]. NEHIH offers physical office spaces, mentorship programs, access to funding networks, and specialized training workshops tailored to the local context [4].

The Gombe State ICT Hub is another prominent facility that supports tech-driven start-ups through access to digital infrastructure, including high-speed internet and software development tools. This hub partners with local universities and private sector actors to deliver skill-building programs in coding, digital marketing, and business management [19]. These initiatives are vital for bridging the digital divide in Northeastern Nigeria, where many entrepreneurs lack the competencies needed to compete in digital marketplaces [14,20].

Additionally, university-based business development centers in the region, such as those at Adamawa State University and Federal University Gombe, provide incubation services that integrate academic research with practical business support. These centers often collaborate with governmental agencies and international development organizations to provide start-ups with seed funding, business advisory, and access to market networks [10,15].

While these incubators vary in scope and scale, a common thread is their emphasis on providing not only physical resources but also intangible assets such as mentorship, business training, and networking opportunities that are critical for start-up success [3,13]. However, many incubators still face challenges such as limited funding, inadequate digital infrastructure, and difficulties in sustaining long-term engagement with start-ups, which highlight the need for increased policy and institutional support [1,10].

### Marketing Challenges Faced by Start-Ups in North-eastern Nigeria

Start-ups in North-eastern Nigeria encounter a complex array of marketing challenges that undermine their ability to establish and grow their customer base effectively. These challenges stem from both structural and capacity-related issues, many of which are exacerbated by the socio-economic conditions of the region.

**Limited Market Research Capability:** Many early-stage ventures lack the necessary skills, tools, and financial resources to conduct comprehensive market research. This limitation significantly restricts their ability to identify and understand evolving customer needs, preferences, and behaviours, as well as to map competitive landscapes accurately [11]. Without reliable market insights, start-ups struggle to position their products or services effectively, often leading to

misaligned offerings and inefficient allocation of scarce marketing resources [1].

**Low Brand Visibility:** Start-ups in the region frequently operate with tight budgets that limit their marketing reach. Compounded by poor access to mainstream media outlets—such as television, radio, and print—these ventures find it difficult to build strong brand recognition and recall among target audiences [3]. The resultant low brand visibility restricts their market penetration and inhibits the development of customer trust and loyalty, which are essential for long-term sustainability [11].

**Digital Illiteracy and Infrastructure Deficits:** Digital marketing has become a cornerstone for modern marketing strategies worldwide. However, in North-eastern Nigeria, low levels of digital literacy among entrepreneurs and limited internet penetration present significant barriers to adopting and leveraging digital marketing channels [14,20]. The inadequate digital infrastructure—including unstable electricity supply and slow internet speeds—further discourages the effective use of online marketing tools such as social media advertising, search engine optimization, and e-commerce platforms. This digital divide restricts start-ups from accessing wider markets and exploiting cost-effective promotional channels that could otherwise enhance their competitiveness [8].

**Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Deficiencies:** Many start-ups operate without structured customer relationship management systems or strategies, leading to suboptimal engagement with their customers [21]. This lack of CRM capability results in missed opportunities for personalized communication, effective complaint resolution, and loyalty-building initiatives, which are critical components of customer retention and advocacy [12]. Moreover, the informal nature of many start-ups in the region exacerbates this issue, as customer data collection and analysis are often neglected or poorly managed.

Together, these challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions to build marketing capacities, improve access to digital tools, and develop customer-centric practices among start-ups in North-eastern Nigeria. Business incubators, with their role as facilitators of entrepreneurial development, are well positioned to address these gaps through specialized training, mentorship, and access to marketing resources.

### Marketing Support Services Provided by Incubators

Business incubators play a pivotal role in strengthening the marketing capabilities of start-ups by offering tailored support services that address common challenges and equip entrepreneurs with essential skills and resources.

#### Market Research and Business Intelligence

Incubators often facilitate start-ups' access to valuable market data and research tools that would otherwise be unaffordable or unavailable to them. Through workshops and training sessions, incubators teach entrepreneurs how to analyze consumer behavior, segment markets, and develop effective pricing strategies. These activities enable start-ups to better understand their target customers and competitive environment, thereby enhancing their marketing

planning and decision-making processes [6,13]. Furthermore, incubators may partner with research institutions or consultants to provide customized market intelligence reports tailored to specific industries or regions, boosting start-ups' ability to identify emerging opportunities and threats.

### Branding and Promotion Support

A strong brand identity is crucial for start-ups to differentiate themselves in crowded markets. Incubators assist entrepreneurs in developing cohesive branding elements such as logos, mission and vision statements, and consistent visual design across marketing materials. Additionally, incubators facilitate access to promotional platforms including local trade fairs, exhibitions, business competitions, and media channels. These platforms offer start-ups exposure to potential customers, investors, and partners, helping to increase brand visibility and credibility [15]. In some cases, incubators also organize pitch events and networking sessions where start-ups can showcase their brands to wider audiences.

### Digital Marketing Training and Tools

Given the growing importance of digital marketing, many incubators prioritize equipping start-ups with the skills and resources needed to leverage online platforms effectively. Training programs often cover social media marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing campaigns, and content creation strategies [16,22]. By mastering these tools, entrepreneurs can cost-effectively increase their reach and engage with customers more interactively. Moreover, some incubators provide free or subsidized access to digital marketing software, website development services, and analytics tools, lowering barriers to digital adoption and helping start-ups track and optimize their campaigns [23].

### CRM and Customer Engagement Platforms

Maintaining strong relationships with customers is vital for start-up growth and sustainability. Incubators introduce entrepreneurs to customer relationship management (CRM) systems—ranging from simple spreadsheets to sophisticated cloud-based platforms—that help organize and analyze customer data. Beyond technical tools, incubators mentor start-ups in developing customer engagement strategies, including effective feedback mechanisms, loyalty programs, personalized communications, and complaint resolution processes [24]. These initiatives contribute to enhanced customer satisfaction, repeat business, and positive word-of-mouth referrals. By embedding a customer-centric approach early in their development, start-ups can build lasting competitive advantages in challenging markets.

### Access to Markets and Networks

Through partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and private companies, incubators facilitate access to markets and strategic partners (Roberts & Eesley, 2009; Porter, 1990).

## Strategic Recommendations

To maximize the impact of business incubators on the marketing success of start-ups in North-eastern Nigeria, a set of strategic actions is essential. These recommendations aim to enhance the relevance, accessibility, and effectiveness of marketing support services within incubator programs.

### Strengthening Marketing Curricula in Incubator Programs

Incubators should deepen their marketing training curricula by incorporating advanced modules that cover both traditional marketing principles and emerging digital marketing techniques. This includes practical skills in branding, consumer psychology, market analytics, social media strategy, search engine optimization (SEO), and content marketing [12,21]. Offering case studies, simulations, and hands-on projects can improve entrepreneurs' ability to apply marketing concepts to real-world challenges. Moreover, continuous curriculum updates are necessary to keep pace with fast-evolving marketing trends and technologies, ensuring start-ups are well-equipped to compete in dynamic markets.

### Localization of Marketing Content

Marketing strategies must be contextually tailored to reflect the unique socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics of North-eastern Nigeria. Incubators should design marketing training and support materials in local languages and integrate culturally relevant examples, narratives, and media formats to increase comprehension and acceptance [17,25]. Understanding local consumer behaviour, trust-building practices, and communication preferences will allow start-ups to create more authentic brand messages and improve market penetration. Additionally, partnerships with local media outlets and community leaders can amplify marketing efforts in culturally sensitive ways.

### Policy and Institutional Support

Effective government policies are crucial to institutionalizing incubators as sustainable engines for entrepreneurial growth and marketing development. Policymakers should recognize incubators as strategic partners in regional economic development and allocate dedicated funding to expand their infrastructure, technical capacity, and outreach programs [10,14]. This may include grants, tax incentives, and public-private partnerships that lower operational costs for incubators and facilitate access to marketing resources for start-ups. Establishing regulatory frameworks that encourage innovation and protect intellectual property will further strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### Inclusive Marketing Training

Incubators must prioritize inclusivity in their marketing training programs, with deliberate efforts to empower women, youth, and other marginalized groups. Tailored initiatives that address specific barriers—such as limited access to technology, cultural restrictions, and educational gaps—will help broaden economic participation and foster diverse entrepreneurial leadership (Figuerola-Armijos, Dabson, & Johnson, 2012). This can be achieved through mentorship schemes, flexible training schedules, gender-sensitive learning materials, and dedicated funding for disadvantaged groups. Inclusivity not only promotes equity but also expands the market base for innovative products and services within the region.

## Conclusion

Business incubators serve as critical catalysts for the marketing success and sustainability of start-ups, especially within resource-constrained and socio-economically challenged environments



like North-eastern Nigeria. In a region grappling with high youth unemployment, infrastructural deficits, and security challenges, incubators provide much-needed support to bridge the considerable gaps in capital, skills, and market access that often stifle new ventures' growth and survival. By delivering targeted marketing support—including access to market research data, branding assistance, digital marketing training, and customer relationship management tools—incubators enable start-ups to build stronger market presence, acquire and retain customers, and enhance brand equity, all of which are essential to their long-term viability [4,13].

Moreover, incubators not only provide technical resources but also foster entrepreneurial mind-sets and networks that can mitigate the adverse effects of the region's economic and security challenges. This holistic approach is crucial for overcoming structural barriers and empowering entrepreneurs to innovate and compete effectively in both local and wider markets. However, the success of incubators in fulfilling this role hinges on deliberate and strategic investments in marketing capacity building tailored to the unique socio-cultural and economic context of Northeastern Nigeria. This includes enhancing curricula to cover advanced digital marketing techniques, localizing marketing strategies to resonate with diverse communities, and ensuring inclusivity for marginalized groups such as women and youth [9,12].

Institutional and policy-level support is equally vital. Governments and development agencies must recognize incubators as essential infrastructure for entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in underserved regions. Funding, regulatory frameworks, and public-private partnerships can significantly strengthen incubator effectiveness, enabling them to scale their impact and foster more resilient start-ups. Such support aligns with broader economic development goals, including job creation, poverty reduction, and technological advancement.

Finally, while this paper has highlighted the marketing dimensions of incubator support, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of incubator programs on start-up performance and regional economic growth. Evaluative studies could provide valuable insights into best practices and inform policy decisions. By continuing to build on this foundation, stakeholders can harness the full potential of business incubators as engines of inclusive economic transformation in North-eastern Nigeria and similar contexts.

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