

BUILDING PATIENT LOYALTY USING ONLINE TOOLS

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The aim of the paper is to present the online tools used by private healthcare organizations in order to generate patient loyalty. The research emphasizes a comparative analyze between the Romanian and other European countries private healthcare organizations referring to online tools used by these organizations on their websites to generate patient loyalty.

Keywords: healthcare marketing, patient loyalty, online tools, relationship marketing

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Healthcare marketing saw from a relationship marketing approach

Even if it was not easily accepted in the field of healthcare services, the importance of marketing is more and more recognized nowadays by the organizations activating in the field. Due to ethical aspects involved in the healthcare delivery process, to the special characteristics of this market, the particular profile of the consumer of healthcare services and, also, probably because of the twisted understanding of the marketing role in the life of an organization, the marketing orientation of hospitals is no older than about two decades.

The deep analyze in the field of healthcare services emphasize not only its complexity, but also its interdisciplinary feature under many aspects, and also reveals a particular field of study with many particular features, we may call it a sensible field. Its complexity is discovered by the multitude of perspectives view it can be looked from. It is a place where many fields of interest are intersecting, both economic and social.

In order to achieve their objectives, the healthcare organizations should follow and adapt to uncontrollable factors, which are building actually the macroeconomic environment of the organization⁵²³:

- demographic environment: explosive increase in population at global level, segmentation by age, educational groups;
- economic environment: income distribution, savings, debt, possibilities to obtain the required resources regarding activity performance;
- ecological environment: high toxicity, noise pollution or pollution of the environment with toxic substances;
- technological environment: acceleration of pace of technological change, the infinity of innovation possibilities, the increasing number of technological regulations etc.;
- political environment: laws and regulations regarding the organization and distribution of medical care from one country to another and
- cultural environment: beliefs, values and behavior norms.

⁵²³ Bratucu, G. (2003) Marketing sanitar, in Florescu C., Malcomete, P., Pop, N. Al. (coord), Dictionar explicativ de marketing, Ed. Economica, 2003, pp. 432-433

Besides these major factors, there are also forces that can be influenced by the organization and which are part of the marketing environment: customers, competitors, suppliers and communication channels. In Romania, the development of the healthcare services market after 1990 led to the growth of the marketing role into the life of healthcare organizations. The new perspective got after 1990 by Romanians leads to a new vision of the Romanian population regarding the healthcare services. Under the influence of major factors like liberalization, privatization and globalization, the healthcare services sector is involved in a process characterized by an accentuated dynamic. As results of this process, the competition has grown especially when talking about the private sector of healthcare services field, there are demographic and social changes at the population level, the technologic impact in the medical sector is huge, the new companies' perspective regarding the employees' healthcare led to a new kind of customer in this field – the organizations. (Rădulescu, 2008).

Customer relationship management is focused on the idea of situating the client in the center of the company's culture and activity (Țarcă, 2010). In such a context, the healthcare organizations are more and more concerned about finding efficient ways to keep the existing customers and to create and maintain their loyalty. This thing is possible only by developing long-term and mutual relationships between the organization and its clients, and this vision opens the perspective of approaching relationship marketing in a strategic manner.

Nowadays, a private hospital is a commercial enterprise which has to face fierce competition and in order to operate successfully on the market, its products and services should be perceived as a solution for the patient's problems and in return he is willing to pay for it. In general, we consider that a University Medical Center should be also an institute for research and development and should include training and specialization programs for resident doctors.

All the business operations are part of a life cycle which is made of several phases that are forming a process by repeating themselves. (Figure 1 – Customer Relationship Management is as integrated part of the CRM). The process of Customer Relationship Management consists of the following sub-processes: understanding the customer, selling to the customer and taking care of the customer, in short: Understand, Sell, Care. CRM is not about the disease process in the foreground, but especially about the well-being, the state of health of the patient, his/her relations with relatives and friends. This process will contribute more and more to the efficiency of the organisation. Factors as: customer service, a better productivity, cost savings, reduced medical errors, improved health outcomes are the main objectives of the private sector. These major objectors are better attained valuing CRM approach.

Figure 1. The organization of the processes in the Siemens Medical Solutions enterprise



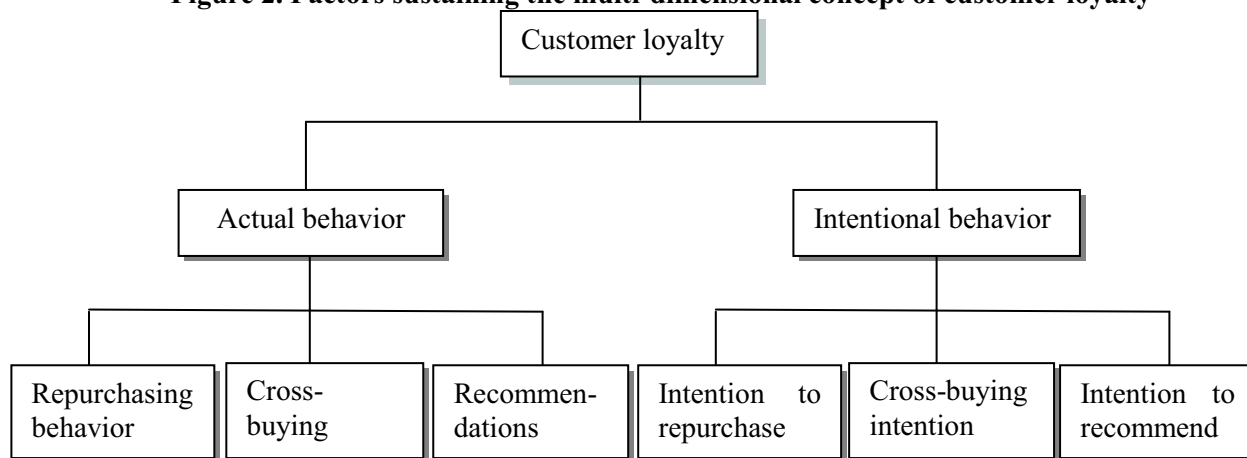
Source: Walter, J., Mang, H. – Medical Process Management, Siemens Healthcare Sector, Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2008, p. 23

Customer satisfaction is a decisive factor that generates customer loyalty (Bruhn, 2001).

Customer loyalty is the sum of measures took by a company in order to influence in a positive way the behavioral intentions of its actual and potential customers regarding company's offer, aiming to create, establish and develop long-time relations with these customers (Diller, 1996, Meyer/Oeverman, 1998, Bruhn, 2001).

Also, it is generally recognized that the concept of customer loyalty implies two dimensions: the dimension of the actual behavior and the dimension of the intentional behavior (Meyer/Oevermann, 1995, Bruhn 2001). From this point of view, the concept of customer loyalty is a multi-dimensional one based on the variables presented in Figure 2 as factors sustaining this concept (Homburg/Bruhn, 1999, Bruhn, 2001).

Figure 2. Factors sustaining the multi-dimensional concept of customer loyalty



Source: Bruhn, M., Orientarea spre clienți – temelia afacerii de succes, Editura Economică, București, 2001, p. 109

Based on holism theory (Gk. Holas = whole), which says that the whole always has priority more than the total sum of individual parts, holistic marketing requires development and implementation of marketing programs, processes and measures with a wide spectrum and correlated with each other (Pop/Fotea/Mihoc/Pop 2009). The four pillars of the holistic marketing approach: relationship marketing, integrated marketing, omnipresent within the organization and socially responsible marketing (Kotler/Koller 2008) are reflected in a particular and very profound way in the healthcare marketing field.

Romanian private healthcare services – a statistic preview

According to the data revealed in a study made public by the Mednet Marketing Research Center, the market referring to the private healthcare services had a growth of 56% percents comparatively to the year 2008, targeting a value of 104 million Euros. Also, the same study revealed that the most important criteria used in the process of choosing a private medical clinic are:

- medical equipment;
- waiting time to get a consultation;
- availability of consultation;
- reputation of the medical staff;
- cost of the services;
- general appearance of the buildings and cabinets;
- reputation of the clinic.

Another study made public in 2010 by Companiesandmarkets.com says that the market of private healthcare services in Romania is characterized as with one of the faster development in the Center and Eastern European countries.

A quick analyze of the data included in Romania's statistical yearbook 2008 referring to the sanitary units shows that the number of the private sanitary units are increasing year by year starting with the year 2000 (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of sanitary units having private majority

TYPE OF SANITARY UNITS	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<i>Hospitals</i>	3	4	5	5	9	11	17	22
<i>Hospital and specialized ambulatories</i>	-	-	-	-	-	4	5	9
<i>Polyclinics</i>	163	140	161	168	204	219	232	241
<i>Dispensaries</i>	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
<i>Health care centers</i>	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
<i>Balneary sanatoria</i>	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
<i>Diagnosis and curative centers</i>	-	-	-	-	-	15	19	20
<i>Health specialized centers</i>	46	60	87	113	112	131	115	130
<i>General practitioner offices</i>	4698	5220	5758	2483	1021	833	938	992
<i>Family doctors offices</i>	-	-	-	-	1875	2007	2065	2524
<i>Medical civil societies</i>						45	41	50
<i>Health specialized offices</i>	-	-	-	3962	4313	4577	5501	6937
<i>Total of the units mentioned above</i>	4910	5424	6011	6731	7534	7845	8936	10929

Source: Statistical yearbook of Romania, 2008

We excluded from this table the dentist offices, pharmacies and pharmaceutical point and some other units related with these and considered as not being relevant for our study.

As shown in the table above, the number of hospitals having private majority doubled in 2007 (22 hospitals) comparing with 2005 (11 hospitals). Also, for the type of units mentioned in this statistic, the number of total units increased in 2007 with about 39% comparing with the year 2005, and with about 22% comparing with the year 2006.

Research Methodology

Based on observation, in this research we investigated the websites of 10 private hospitals in Romania and 10 private hospitals located in other European countries, in order to underline the online tools the private hospitals use to generate patient loyalty. Also, we were interested to compare, from this point of view, the situation regarding the Romanian private hospitals' websites and those from the other countries. Individual private hospitals having active websites as of April 2010 were considered as the population for the study.

The framework of the research was designed based on the classification of customer loyalty tools in three categories: loyalty tools focused on interaction, loyalty tools focused on satisfaction and loyalty tools aiming to prevent customer migration (Homburg/Bruhn 1999, Bruhn 2001). We identified 22 tools used on hospitals' websites aiming to generate patients' loyalty.

The results of the study may be concluded as follows:

- in Romania there are no private university hospitals;
- the possibility of collecting data is mainly through recommendations made by family doctors, Customer Care Service (appointments, complaints), feedback (online form);
- in general, only few companies have a forum where customers can discuss their personal experiences; negative mouth-to-mouth propaganda;
- the price is an essential factor in taking a decision by Romanian customers. The price information is present on 8 of the 10 Romanian websites we analyzed, but only on one website of the 10 non-Romanian hospitals' websites;
- the foreign companies do not have a specialized department of Customer Complaint Management or, at least, it is not mentioned on their websites;
- only four of all analysed private companies have a research department and organize medical conferences;
- online appointment is made in the most of Romanian companies (but not in the foreign ones);
- the most used online loyalty tools focused on interaction are: developing products in collaboration with other institutions (networking), generating customers database using the webpage, and the presence on the website of the telephone numbers for special services;
- referring to the online loyalty tools focused on satisfaction, the most used are the section presenting advices and medical news, and the photos presenting the buildings and the cabinets. Most of the Romanian hospitals offer the possibility to make online appointments, but only one of the foreign hospitals' website we analyzed offers this possibility;
- Romanian hospitals use more online loyalty tools aiming to prevent customer migration than the foreign hospitals. Anyway, the most used tools in this category are those referring to the information about the medical equipments used and the information describing doctors' reputation;
- comparing the Romanian private hospitals with foreign ones it can be observed that later ones are oriented more to a wider range of patients, including the ones who are looking for methods of relaxation and maintenance of the state of health;
- in Romania, private hospitals are fulfilling the functions of the public ones offering sometimes high tech medical devices in order to perform accurate diagnosis, which because of the limited allocated budget by the state to the public sector (Romanian hospitals), these would not afford to acquire them;

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