

DECISION MAKING FACTORS IN PURCHASING THE ANALGESICS BRANDS ON ROMANIAN PHARMACEUTICAL MARKET

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Abstract: *Nowadays promotional activities play a very important role, especially in pharmaceutical sector. This statement is supported by the huge amount of marketing expenses of the top pharmaceutical companies (Olson, 2015). We were interested to investigate the way people choose the analgesic brand and to identify how powerful are advertising features, recommendations or previous experience in the decision making process. Taking into consideration that on the Romanian market are available a limited number of notorious brands and many local brands, we wanted to investigate the attributes of brands and products taking into account in the purchase decision of the pharmaceutical industry. This is a quantitative research of the romanian consumer. We used four focus groups as a research technique. The findings reveal that among the most important product features are the quality of the product which is reflected through its quick action (releasing the pain) and no side effects. Because of the fact that most of the analgesics are over the counter drugs (OTC) and they can be bought without prescription, the pharmacists' recommendation represent one of the key factor in choosing a brand, among previous positive experience and promotional strategies. A good brand is according to the respondents, one which is well promoted on the television. Therefore, the consumer is attracted to powerful brands, effective products and the pharmacist's recommendation may play an important role because of his authority in the field. Powerful brands are those that can afford to promote effectively and those that are notorious or very well known in the local market.*

Keywords: *promotional activity; decision making; analgesics; brand notoriety.*

JEL Classification: *M31; M37; M38.*

1. Introduction

In this paper, we were interested to explore consumer's opinion regarding promotional activity, to identify the main elements taken into account in the decision making process of an analgesic brand. Also, our interest was to determine what type of promotional message has a greater impact on the purchase decision. Based on the research aim, further investigations and research should complete the whole picture regarding the consumer's perception of analgesic brands.

The key argument of researching how and why customers choose a specific analgesic brand is that big companies allocate huge budgets in order to promote their products, in most cases, greater than the research-development budget. Our curiosity is to investigate how marketing activities interfere with the customer's choice, what are they looking for when choosing a brand and what marketing tools have a higher impact on their purchase decision. The hypotheses are that people are more sensitive to pharmacists' recommendations than other sources such as friends or relatives and this is in most cases the key factor in their brand decision; due to previous research, another hypothesis is that consumers trust a pharmaceutical brand mainly because of their previous positive experience Donohue et al. (2009).

A study of OZONE Foundation shows that 73% of the Romanians use self-medication, from which 22% use it once a month, most of them are women, half of them consider that they have the capability to do that and one of seven parents treats their baby without consulting a physician (Senciuc, 2012). The relevance of self-medication in pharmaceutical regulation is that on the one hand, intense promotion of drugs increases the demand and therefore, self-medication. On the other hand, significant differences are noticed between different people with degrees of education: the more educated people are, the less they use self-medication. In a global perspective, differences of education are common in almost every country and this is another reason why laws, regulations and codes of ethics or guidelines should be powerful instruments to secure the citizens. Another aspect taken into account by the consumer is the medical condition (problem): the consumer is predisposed to self-medicate only if he perceives the condition as a serious one, it is likely to go to a specialist.

Marketing activities are condemned in the pharmaceutical market by many actors because of the fact that health is so important that should not be influenced by promotional activities. Taking into account ethical considerations in marketing activities, (Lege5.ro, 2015) shows the fact that on the Romanian market, promotional activities of the prescription drugs are forbidden. Also, it is forbidden any deceiving information regarding drugs, or any affirmation which can not be proved scientifically.

Communication, which includes marketing activities, is defined as the two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode and decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning (Business dictionary, n.d.). This model in the pharmaceutical industry pictures the main actors: the sender may be the drug manufacturer, state, pharmaceutical wholesalers, physicians, pharmacists or other organisations, while the public who receive the message is made of patients, competitors, pharmaceutical wholesalers, physicians, pharmacists and other organisations. The message may include: drug properties and what makes it different from the others, side effects, dosage, application, to whom it is addressed and the media (means of communication) may be oral, virtual, personal and non-personal. Although marketing is part of the communication, these two concepts are separated by their aim: marketing activities are only those activities which are meant to promote something

(products, brands, ideas, services, organisations etc.) in order to obtain economic benefits.

The marketing mix appeared in 1964 due to Neil Borden, who was inspired by James Cullinton. They have discovered many elements of the marketing mix and succeeded to organize them in a coherent form, where each element has many sub-elements (Stanciu, 2002). The elements of the marketing mix are: product, promotional activities, prices and placement or distribution (Waterschoot and Van den Bulte, 1992). There is a promotional submix, which has specific elements such as: sales promotion, advertising, public relations, events and experiences, direct marketing and personal selling (Kotler et al., 2009). Nowadays, advertising means television commercials, brochures, banners and even commercials available on the internet. This method is an effective and expensive way to promote the product because it reaches to numerous people.

Another important element is sales promotion which has the role to push the products to consumer through special offers, price reduction, free products, merchandising, gifts etc. These techniques are used in order to increase sales which can be done in two ways: intensively by increasing the amount of the products bought or extensively, increasing the number of the clients due to promotional tools used. In the promotional activity of pharmaceuticals, there are many regulations which limit advertising over the counter drugs (OTC) to consumers and it is forbidden to advert prescription drugs (Rx) to patients.

Personal selling is part of the promotional submix and it implies that the pharmacist recommends a specific product to the customer. Taking into consideration that Romanians often go to the pharmacist before consulting a specialist such as a physician, the customers can be very quickly persuaded by the pharmacists advice because he is perceived as the specialist (Pilarczyk, 2011). Another instrument of promotion is rewarding prescribers and people who have the power to increase demand. In communications, the source must be powerful, attractive and credible in order to get to the receptor (Popescu, 2003) because nowadays each person is daily in contact with 3000 up to 5000 promotional messages. In pharmaceutical industry powerful drug manufacturers are trying to persuade physicians, who have these characteristics, to recommend their products intensively, although global ethics limit very much such activities to little amount of money spent.

Beside promotional activities of the marketing submix, marketing is also about product, pricing and distribution techniques and these four elements represent the marketing mix, known as the 4Ps (product, price, placement and promotion). Using an integrated marketing communication system, a company can increase the brand equity. American Marketing Association (2017) defines brand equity being the value of a brand and it is based on consumer attitudes about positive brand attributes and favorable consequences of brand use. The term has evolved since 1960 when it was associated with a logo to a legal instrument meant to protect a brand capital through a trademark. Another association of brand is a shorthand which implies that in general, consumers who have limited time in order to decide what to buy, tend to buy from companies they know (Chevan, 1992). On the other hand, a well known brand may be perceived as something safer because knowing the company, their

values, the price-quality ratio, you have a psychic comfort. According to Kapferer (2004) cited in Maurya and Mishra (2012) perceived risk could be economic (linked to price); functional (linked to performance); psychological (linked to our self-concept); social (linked to our social image) and experiential. All these risks tend to diminish when it comes to well-known (trustful) brands.

Inevitable, a brand is correlated also with the attributes of positioning. Positioning refers to the place of your company in the consumer's mind or the perception of the public regarding the characteristics of your brand. These associations may refer to price, quality, name, packing, emotions, personalities who promote the brand, values, campaigns, previous experiences, places etc. Positioning in strategic marketing is the third step after segmentation of the market and targeting specific segments from the marketing to whom you will address.

The brand value of a pharmaceutical company initially came mattered in order to inform people about the company's existence and about its products, therefore to increase awareness. Now, there are many companies who use the same active substances so each of them must differentiate from another in order to attract consumers. Branding pharmaceuticals is about expressing value, about expressing something else about the product that is valuable to either the patient, physician, or any relevant audience (Seget, 2006).

2. Research Methodology

We used the focus group method in this research in order to investigate the main factors taken into consideration by the consumer of the analgesic drugs. Four focus group sessions were conducted and recorded in Bucharest, Romania, in 2018. From a total of 24 participants, 75% were women and 25% were men. Their age varies between 20 and 65 years old and all of them were high school graduates or above. The aim of this paper is to determine which are the key elements in decision making process of analgesics' purchasing. Other research objectives are: defining a successful analgesic brand, exploring the consumers' perception of advertising analgesic drugs and identifying the main elements of a persuasive advertising. We took into consideration various factors discovered in previous research such as advertising techniques, brand reputation and notoriety and recommendations. Further quantitative investigations are needed in order to measure the influence of each factor.

Based on previous research, the hypotheses of this study are:

1. The consumer is influenced by factors such as: recommendations, brand notoriety, advertisements.
2. The main element that influences the purchase decision of an analgesic is the pharmacist.
3. The consumer wants a qualitative product which means that the drug should have the promised effect.
4. A successful brand is well promoted.
5. The trust in a brand is proportional with previous positive experience.

3. Findings

The focus group recordings were transcribed, collected data was organized, synthesized and compared. The most important results were selected and are presented below.

Analysing nonverbal and paraverbal signs in communicating with the respondents, we observed that while they were talking about promotional activities of analgesics, some of the respondents' attitude was rather angry. Some of them even declared that they are annoyed by the great amount of drug commercials. On the other hand, they recognized the value of promotional activities and some of them agreed with the fact that a promoted brand gain costumers' confidence and it is probable to buy it because it is about their health. Other participants were completely against the promotional activities and stated that the more advertisements of a drug brand they see, the less are the chances to buy it.

3.1. Elements that influence the purchase of a specific brand

Most of the respondents were at first confused by this question and they have mentioned almost all the elements that may influence one's decision: previous experience, physician's recommendations, pharmacist's recommendations, family, friends, promotional activities. During the discussions, they had the time and the opportunity to prioritize the most influential elements.

Some of the participants stated that they use a brand because of *previous positive experience*. Also, they explained that they were taught by parents to take a specific brand and they prefer it because it successfully takes away the pain. In the same situation were respondents who are used with a substance such as Ibuprofen and they know it works. On the other hand, one of the participants said that Bayer was years ago, one of the greatest drug manufacturers, therefore, a long period of time she used their products. Recently, she discovered that Romanian products (Paracetamol) are better because they protect the stomach, unlike Bayer's Paracetamol.

A discussion regarding the trust in some of the most important influential factors emerged: two respondents from different focus groups said that they don't have the time to go to a physician for each of the health problems, therefore they ask the *pharmacist's recommendation*. The reaction of the other participants was negative towards pharmacists' intention: some of them stated that pharmacists will recommend you only the most expensive products because "They don't care about your health. They have a target to reach, therefore their recommendations are the least trustworthy". Some of them mentioned the *physician*, but another respondent said that even physicians are controversial and it is possible to have the same attitude towards patients, such as pharmacists "in order to get a free trip". Other participants said that only the physician has the power to tell you if there are side effects of substances that may put you in danger and he knows if you are allergic to a substance. Therefore, they trust the physician. One of the respondents said he believes both points of view, but physicians can present you more brands.

One of the respondents said he prefers a *well known brand which is promoted* on television because he doesn't have time to go to a physician nor the trust a pharmacist. Two respondents stated that *friends* are a trustful source of information because they are not interested to manipulate you like a pharmacist and also, they may have some experience using those products.

An important idea emerged is that they feel that promoted brands are in the spotlight, while the brands that are not promoted are fading. One of the respondents was very categorical and stated that every time he sees a commercial, he feels he is sent to buy that drug even if he doesn't need it.

3.2. The most important characteristics of the analgesics are: quick action and no side effects

"Certainly, to take away the pain as quickly as they say" was the response of the majority of the respondents. Some of them exemplified that there are cases when the pain does not disappear after 20 minutes or the time the manufacturer ensures it should have an effect. "The promoted effects do not exist. You can realize this after 2 hours of waiting to diminish the pain while on the prospect they say it should disappear after 5 minutes [...] and in most cases the pill is not the reason for the pain relief". Two respondents said that since they realized that these drugs don't have the promoted effect, they do not buy them anymore. The releasing pain time is perceived as a qualitative characteristic of a product which enhance the satisfaction of the customer.

Some of the respondents were very interested in the side effects and one of them was annoyed by the fact that "from those 30 seconds of advertisement, at most 10 are those in which a voice tells you in a quicker and offending manner that in order to see the side effects, you have to read the prospect or to ask for advice of a physician or a pharmacist". Other characteristics are: a low price, good taste, to avoid addictive substances, "as natural substances as they can", not to raise blood tension. Some of the respondents said that psychically is very convenient to have some pills bought just in case of a migrene or other type of pain. Also, they would recommend or even give to friends and known people the pills they use in order to take them if needed, if they are satisfied by with the quality of the product.

3.3. What is a successful brand?

"A good medicine that is adequately promoted"; "They really know how to promote their products"; "even when you go to the pharmacist or the physician, they will recommend you those brands". Most of the participants said that a powerful drug brand is *intensively promoted and recommended*. The respondents noticed that the red circle representing the pain moving in different parts of the body before taking the drug is the main way to express in advertising. And even if it is very common, the impact on the desire to buy that product is positively influenced.

Other element considered is the *history*: "I think Nurofen was one of the first foreign drugs entered on the Romanian market". Another respondent said that "old analgesics got to be known by most of the people and it doesn't matter if the manufacturer in romanian or not. People are now aware of their existence and they

have made a set of drugs used that can hardly be changed by anything new". The same person said "Aspirina and Paracetamol are universal drugs and can't be overwhelmed by anything new".

Also, analyzing why Nurofen is one of the most successful brands of analgesics a respondent said that it is because they have *different products for different types of pain*: "I think it was very important to see that there are multiple products which target a specific pain such as headache, shoulder pain, back pain, which acts in 5 minutes, in 10 minutes, made of jelly or syrup and you can choose whatever you want".

Another characteristic is the *brand name*. One of the participants said "there are some catchy brand names that make you think of an analgesic or of a specific substance: for instance, Nurofen makes you think of Ibuprofen (the active substance), Algocalmin makes you think that it has a calming effect or that Antinevralgic fights against nevralgies". A drug remembered by some participants was Advil which has the same substance as Nurofen, but the name is not so "catchy" compared to the market leader.

Moving forward to trustful brands, respondents discussed about the purchase decision between a cheap unknown drug brand and a powerful brand which have the same substance: "between a cheap no-name and Nurofen, I trust more Nurofen because I don't know...it is about promotional activities"; "some pharmacists recommend unknown brands because they use the same substance, but people don't want to buy them and ask for something better...you can't make experiments on your body"; "if the brand is always recommended it is clear in my mind that it is a good product". On the other hand, there were two participants who said that they use to buy new brands in order to test their action.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this paper represent the first step in researching this topic and may be of interest to consumers, pharmaceutical companies, marketers and also to institutions which are supervising the regulations. Further research should be considered on this topic in order to establish adequate ways of promoting pharmaceutical brands. The reasearch limitations of this study are: the limited budget available, the reduced period of time and the fact that the researchers were conducting the focus groups, although it is recommended to involve a different person than the researchers to be the moderator of the discussions .

This study confirms the hypothese that he consumer is influenced by facors such as: recommendations, brand notoriety, advertisements. There are also some of the hypothesis that were not confirmed by this piece of research: the main element that influence the purchase decision of an analgesic is not the pharmacist, but the previous positive experience. This means that consumers may take the risk to become immune to a substance if they use it intensively and during a long period of time. This also means that they may be skeptical about the pharmacists' recommendations. Another hypothesis that was not confirmed is that trust in a brand comes with previous experience. Respondents said that historical background has a greater influence on their choice because they are used to some brands (traditional

brands). On the other hand, there were respondents who said that they may test new brands. In order to get more information about this topic, we believe that further quantitative research is needed.

Other findings suggest that advertised analgesics have a positive impact over the consumer's perception, influencing trust in the brand, but there are too many drugs' commercials. The key factor in influencing the trust in an analgesic brand may be the historical background of the manufacturer. Regarding the product, the findings suggest that the most important characteristics of the analgesics are quick action and no side effects. The perfect analgesic is the one that targets the pain, but it is far more important to feel a quick relief of the pain and to have as few side effects as possible. Also, a successful brand is intensively promoted and recommended.

In the pharmaceutical sector another problem is that many clinical trials were bought or counterfieted and the side effects were not known until the drug entered on the market. This strategy is not just unethical, but also illegal and unfortunately, it is not eradicated. Therefore, we believe that the manufacturer should be punished severely if such fraud is proved.

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