

PHARMACEUTICAL MARKETING VALUES AND RESEARCH OF USER SATISFACTION IN MEDICAL PHARMACY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: The primary objective of this research was to examine the factors that contribute to the decision to buy medicines that can be bought in a pharmacy without a prescription and that are not on special lists of medicines that require special approval. The research collected socio-demographic, medical, professional, and institutional data. The collected data were processed using the software IBM SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Science) version 25. In the paper, descriptive statistics were applied to describe the sample, correlation analysis to examine the association, t-test of independent samples, and one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences between groups. Pharmaceutical marketing is not a new phenomenon, but with the constant advancement of technology, this field of marketing offers a large field for applied research. Pharmacy as an activity is particularly sensitive, and when studying it and pharmaceutical marketing, it is necessary to include both societal marketing and socially responsible marketing. Pharmacy visits are typically not routine, occurring during times of illness, emergencies, or when seeking health advice. Such infrequent visits can make consumers more sensitive to the service they receive as they are stepping into an unfamiliar environment, often filled with anxiety or urgency. Opposite, the social dimension of a pharmacist's role cannot be overstated. Pharmacists are not just dispensers of medication; they are vital healthcare providers who often engage in patient counseling and health education. They must balance the need for profitability with the imperative to serve public health interests. This includes offering affordable medications, providing free consultations, and participating in community health initiatives. The pharmacy profession needs to be continuously supported by laws with an impact at both professional and organizational levels. The results of this research will be useful to pharmaceutical institutions in developing programs that affect the quality of life.

Keywords: *pharmaceutical marketing, consumer of pharmaceutical products, medicines without a doctor's prescription.*

Field: Social Economics

1. INTRODUCTION

The pharmaceutical profession in the territory of Serbia has long been highly valued and complex. Namely, this profession involved a combination of chemist, alchemist, and psychotherapist for each patient. Patients demanded a personalized approach to solving the most complex health problems, which posed a serious challenge to the pharmacists of that time in finding solutions. Today, being a modern pharmacist means a lot, research work in the field of pharmacy, distribution of drugs and medicines, but also the performance of numerous marketing functions as well as the application of modern commercial business. Pharmaceutical medicine is a scientific field within medicine focused on the entire lifecycle of medicinal products, from their initial discovery and development to their evaluation, documentation, ongoing monitoring, and marketing, all with the aim of improving patient health and the well-being of the community. (Ratković et al., 2011). The basic aspects that influence consumer expectations are user needs, previous experience, recommendations, and promotional promises (Radu et al., 2017).

Over recent years, the pharmaceutical industry has experienced significant growth, highlighting its rising prominence both domestically and across Europe. This expansion within the medical field has prompted numerous experts to focus on the sector, particularly examining how communication strategies can impact patients (Radu et al., 2017). The pharmaceutical function contains highly specialized pharmaceutical services that must be provided primarily by highly specialized personnel in the field, therefore pharmaceutical marketing has a broader meaning than marketing medical products because in this marketing the light is on the specialized services of pharmacists and all forms of pharmaceutical patient care. Pharmaceutical marketing (marketing in pharmacy) is not a new phenomenon. The connection between pharmacy and marketing begins at the beginning of the 19th century in the unregulated medical market using advertising, trademarks and packaging (Mackey et al., 2012). Since then, until today, pharmaceutical marketing has gone through and is going through numerous changes, among which

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probably the most important change is market regulation. (Mihajlović et al., 2021).

Marketing in pharmacy means managing the distribution of medicines as well as enabling customers - patients to get the right medicine in the right place and at the right time. In order for this basic function of marketing to be achievable in such a sensitive area as pharmacy, it is necessary to manage the demand and required quantities and organize the logistic delivery of medicines in accordance with the norms and the needs of pharmacists. So that quality becomes an important element in order to achieve a competitive advantage and achieve the strategy of successful service organizations based on quality. Medicines that are distributed through pharmacy institutions are limited by legal norms and regulations, which vary from country to country. Also most of these medicines are divided into two groups: those obtained by prescription and those purchased over the counter. In this research paper, the authors wanted to shed light on the role of pharmacists in meeting the needs of consumers for medications from another group. Medicines belong to an unpopular group of products, regardless of whether they are obtained by prescription or bought over the counter. The price of medicines is constantly under the scrutiny of the public, and they are often discussed publicly (Govender et al., 2020). Price has a marketing dimension if it is formed according to research on consumer requirements, while promotion is a highly visible marketing activity. Towards the most transparent marketing activity, promotion is a form of communication, and it is known that "the process of exchange begins and ends with communication".

Promotion as an integral part of marketing in the pharmaceutical industry is regulated by numerous laws and by-laws. For example, advertising to the population is allowed only for drugs sold without a prescription, while advertising to the population is prohibited for drugs of other groups. This way of separating medicines is a big limitation for the pharmaceutical industry, but on the other hand, it is a protection for the consumer against the unethical behavior of pharmacists. At that moment, the knowledge and skills of pharmacists in the "field" come into play. In this aspect, the role of social marketing is especially important. Socially responsible marketing encompasses a comprehensive understanding of ethical principles and societal expectations across all facets of marketing, including environmental stewardship, legal compliance, and socially conscious initiatives. This concept demands adherence to the ethical and social implications inherent in marketing practices. (Dašić et al., 2022).

A socially responsible marketing concept is imperative for every pharmaceutical company; it implies the business of a pharmaceutical company that goes beyond its primary business goal, which is profit maximization. The focus of every pharmaceutical company must first of all be social aspects, ecological aspects, and then also economic aspects of business, i.e. profit maximization. The concept of social marketing, which is otherwise very close to pharmaceutical marketing, is linked to the 50s of the last century and the appearance of the book by Bowen - "Social Responsibility of business people" (Bowen, 2013). This pioneer in the study of something so epoch-making, laid the foundations of social marketing, especially in professions that operate on the edge between empathy and humanity on the one hand and the foundations of inexorable economic figures on the other. The pharmaceutical industry is certainly this area. Therefore, the most comprehensive representation of socially responsible marketing would be, according to Farnsworth (Farnsvort,2017), where socially responsible business includes "a whole range of business initiatives and policies that provide a positive contribution to the well-being of the company and shareholders, regardless of whether it is employees, consumers or the local community, and at the same time operating in the interest of another group of shareholders - its shareholders" (Friedman, 2021). Social marketing is a condition for good relations with customers, and "good relations with customers represent a factor of competitive advantage" (Ratković, 2023). Kotler and Lee define socially responsible business as follows; "Corporate social responsibility is a determination to improve the welfare of the community through discretionary business practices and contributions at the expense of the corporation's resources" (Kotler, 2007). If we start from this definition as a basic premise, we can clearly define what marketing in the pharmaceutical industry should entail, which is certainly the following:

- Pharmaceutical products belong to the so-called unwanted products, unlike some other products such as fashion products, food products or, for example, cosmetic products. When a person is sick, he has only one wish, and that is to be healthy, so these products are related to a state in which no one wants to find themselves voluntarily, and the products are very specific in their characteristics compared to all others, so they also require specific marketing approach.

- Researching the market of pharmaceutical products does not only refer to the research of supply and demand but above all to the research of the real need for the product. Research of the price area, which is limited on the one hand by legal regulations and on the other by the actual production costs and the need to operate profitably. Research also goes in the direction of packaging and promotion of these products, because the legal regulations in many countries are extremely strict and vary from country to country, even in the EU, and therefore promotion and distribution channels require prior market research

and coordination.

- Sales channels of pharmaceutical products must ensure the closeness of the patient to the pharmacist, then the exceptional expertise of the pharmacist, both in the field of pharmacy itself and in the adequate commercial knowledge and skills that the pharmacist uses in the presentation of the product. The point of sale requires a special note of comfort due to the specific condition of the patient with a tendency for the patient to have the intention of returning to the same institution.

- "The basic task of modern marketing is building good relations with relevant market participants, but also with the social community" (Smith et al., 2002), and the key prerequisite for this is to deliver the right product at the right time and in the right place. In order to realize this task optimally, it is necessary to manage supply and demand and to organize a logistical short supply chain. For this purpose, standardized processes in all spheres of marketing help pharmacists a lot. A key part of quality management is standardization, which forms the foundation for having a quality system in every business and throughout the entire economy. So, when talking about quality, we always begin by assuming that standardization has already been taken care of, because it's believed that quality cannot exist without the right standards in place. (Panvelkar et al., 2023).

- Legal regulations that regulate the promotion of drugs and other pharmaceutical products are extremely rigorous, leaving the marketing space for this form of activity very narrow. Also, these products, and making a decision about their purchase, is very unpopular because of the specific condition of the consumer, so you have to be especially careful because the promotion as such can cause a counter effect in the consumer.

- Medicines as products are divided into two groups, those that can be bought over the counter and those that can only be obtained with a doctor's prescription, and their distribution is under strict control. This division of products and different regulations for these two groups imposes the need to build a marketing plan separately for each group. All this increases marketing costs for the pharmaceutical industry, but it also limits the room for maneuver of marketing. On the other hand, extremely rigorous legislation that regulates all areas of the pharmaceutical industry protects the consumer from unethical behavior and practices in the pharmaceutical industry.

The future of the pharmaceutical industry will not only be in terms of the adoption of new technologies and discoveries in the production process, it also lies partly in the development of specific pharmaceutical marketing, which must take into account all the peculiarities of both the products themselves and the market, as well as the legislation itself, which is different from country to country and very strict. In the work before you, we tried to investigate the differences in patient satisfaction in relation to trust and pharmaceutical services provided. This paper aims to extend previous research of marketing in pharmacy practice through the study of pharmacists' values and it is a part of a larger project intended to explore user satisfaction with the pharmaceutical service in a community. Opportunistic motives are focused on making a profit as a key goal, based on attracting new customers, that is, maintaining relations with existing ones. Contrasting them, there are altruistic motives whose main goal is to help the customer of the pharmaceutical product, and then there are other goals that do not have to bring any profit. (Ratković et al., 2013). Pharmaceutical marketing certainly brings a large number of opportunities for research in the near future. The overall aim of this study was to analyze factors that affect customer satisfaction with the service provided in pharmacies. The secondary aim is to determine the correlation of these factors to pharmacists' perceptions of difficulty and frequency of ethical issues in community pharmacy settings.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Statistical data processing and analysis were performed using the software IBM SPSS (Statistical Package of Social Science) version 25. In the paper, descriptive statistics were applied to describe the sample, correlation analysis to examine the relationship, a t-test of independent samples, and one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the difference between groups. A level of 0.05 was used for the threshold value of significance. The data analysis also included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis (Hughes et al., 2003, Popescu, 2011).

3. RESULTS

We conducted marketing research using 150 patients aged between 16 and 74 years, affiliated with pharmacies in Serbia. The period of collecting data was 12 May - 15 October 2024 and it used an online survey based on a questionnaire with 20 questions. The scales used were the semantic scale, Likert scale, and open questions. 150 subjects participated in the research, of which 83 were male and 67 were

female. The age range of the respondents is from 16 to 74 years ($M=37.44$, $SD=11.23$). The vast majority of respondents have completed high school (60.7%), while only one respondent has completed doctoral studies. Most respondents are in a relationship (41.3%) or single (39.3%). Almost all respondents are employed (95.4%) with a predominantly monthly income of RSD 65,000 to 90,000 (62.7%). Most respondents are from Belgrade and its surroundings (38%) and Western Serbia (30%). Most respondents, when they have a cold, buy one of the combinations for colds at the pharmacy (36%) or go to the doctor (37%). The vast majority of respondents answered that they buy medicines in case of need, especially when they do not go to the doctor for a prescription or the medicine cannot be obtained through a prescription because it is not on the list (60.67%). More than half of the respondents answered that they use a preparation every day (53.3%) and that they remember television commercials for medicines or other preparations (88.7%). The purchase of a vitamin or natural preparation was most influenced by consultation with a pharmacist in a pharmacy advice from a pharmacist (27.73%) and advice from a doctor (23.47%). The majority of respondents answered that they had no such experience (42.67%), while the majority of respondents had the experience of being offered the most expensive preparation first (29.33%). Respondents most often return to the same pharmacy because it is the closest to them (22.57%) and because of the staff, their kindness, and expertise (21.31%). Respondents are sometimes satisfied with the range of medicines offered in the pharmacy ($M=4.28$, $SD=0.91$). Based on the results, it can be concluded that respondents are most satisfied with employees' willingness to help patients ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.99$), while they are least satisfied with employees' genuine interest in the patient's problem ($M=3.56$, $SD=0.99$). The research investigated whether there is a significant difference in the respondents' satisfaction with shopping at the pharmacy in relation to gender, professional education, marital status, work status, monthly income, and region. The t-test of independent samples was used to examine differences in relation to gender, while the one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences in relation to professional education, marital status, work status, monthly income, and region. Based on the results of the t-test, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the respondents' satisfaction with shopping at the pharmacy in relation to the gender of the respondents. Based on the results of the ANOVA test, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the respondents' satisfaction with shopping at the pharmacy in relation to the respondents' professional qualifications. Based on the post hoc test, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between respondents with a high school diploma and respondents with a higher education ($p=0.008$), where respondents with a higher education have a higher degree of satisfaction. Based on the results of the ANOVA test, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference in the respondents' satisfaction with shopping at the pharmacy in relation to the region, the respondents' work status and the respondents' marital status.

4. DISCUSSIONS

In a survey of user satisfaction with the service provided by a pharmacist in a pharmacy, users showed a high degree of overall satisfaction. The research findings show that patients are happiest when the employees are ready to help them, and therefore they choose the nearest pharmacy from the neighborhood to which they are always happy to return. In this institution, they have intimate and personal contact with the pharmacist, which confirms the safety of the recommended and chosen medicine. Patients are the least satisfied with the fact that pharmacists do not show genuine interest in their health problems and do not engage in studying the diagnosis and course of the disease itself. Taking basic demographic parameters such as gender, marital status, level of education, place of residence and level of income, we can point out that the highest degree of satisfaction with the service provided is expressed by married people with a higher level of education and income. A large number of respondents showed overall satisfaction, which can be seen from the comments posted in the part of the questionnaire intended for that purpose. The procedures for the procurement of medicines that state-owned pharmacies go through are different from the procedures that apply to pharmacy establishments in private ownership. This type of discrimination makes state pharmacies non-competitive and inflexible to market demands, and they do not have active interaction with patients where they would be able to respond to almost every request. Unfortunately, in this way, state-owned pharmacy establishments become uncompetitive, poorly supplied with outdated interiors of sales facilities, which all in all leaves a less favorable impression on the end user. Service users generally have objections to the assortment and supply in state-owned pharmacies, as well as in pharmacies that belong to health centers. Privately owned pharmacy establishments are well supplied, as research shows, and they are also flexible when it comes to procuring the missing medicine. The research highlighted key factors influencing patient satisfaction with pharmacy services, particularly when purchasing over-the-counter medications. The findings underscore the crucial role

of pharmacists in the decision-making process of patients, where friendliness, expertise, and advisory approach are pivotal factors positively affecting service perception. Notably, respondents expressed the highest satisfaction with the willingness of staff to assist, while the lowest level of satisfaction was related to pharmacists demonstrating genuine interest in patients' problems. The analysis revealed no significant differences in satisfaction based on gender, marital status, employment status, or region. However, a statistically significant difference was observed in satisfaction levels concerning educational attainment, with respondents possessing higher education reporting greater satisfaction. Additionally, key purchasing decisions for vitamins and natural supplements were predominantly influenced by pharmacist and physician recommendations, while proximity to the pharmacy and staff expertise were the main reasons for repeat visits. These results highlight the need for continuous improvement in pharmaceutical services through further education and motivation of pharmacists, as well as the adaptation of marketing strategies to better meet patient needs.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of socially responsible marketing principles can strengthen consumer trust and achieve a competitive advantage in this sector. Future research should include a larger sample and examine specific aspects of customer satisfaction in more detail, aiming to enhance the quality of public healthcare. In the future, researchers need to pay more attention to the factors that influence how drugs are marketed and the ethical issues that come up in the pharmaceutical field. This study shows that we have only looked at a small part of this big and complicated area of science.

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