

PARTICULARITIES OF DENTAL MEDICAL SERVICES AND CONSUMERS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

Globalization determines a growth of competition but as well a growth of the opportunity to attract new customers. The dental clinics will have to keep in mind the new characteristics and features of the modern consumer who is more educated, more informed, more active in searching for products and services, more communicative with the providers and the other consumers and more inclined to the cognitive side.

At the same time, although they have to admit the traits of the new type of consumer – for whom there are no borders, the clinics must perform marketing researches and be permanently connected to each patient in order to be aware of the particularities of the local communities and even of the individual traits because the present consumer is more demanding and wants unique non-repetitive consumption experiences.

For a dental clinic, the globalization supposes a global thinking and global action, not the homogenization of products and services they offer, as well as considering their hybridization, especially from the cultural point of view.

Keywords: globalization, dental medical services, dental marketing

JEL Classification: F00, I15, M31

1. Introduction

Globalization is a phenomenon widely approached by many specialists from different angles corresponding not only to economic or social sciences but also from art, technological or biological domains.

The present paper embraces the concept of globalization from a point of view concerning marketing theory and medical care services. The authors have been motivated by the results of various previous researches regarding consumers of

dental medical services, by the dynamics of these services in nowadays economy and visible changes at the level of lifestyle and values of modern consumer portrait.

Dental medical services, because of their complexity and their unique characteristics, have a special place in all consumer behavior. The postmodern consumer and globalization are close interrelated concepts influencing each other, at the level of manifestation and even conceptualization. All the changes that occur in everyday life for the postmodern consumer have objective reasons determined by the globalization characteristics (movement of labor forces, global system of trade, high-speed communication systems, etc.). The way that consumers see their own area of interests, their level of satisfaction has changed irrevocably. In this complex frame, their way to be involved in service provision has also changed, postmodern consumers from our time being a kind of architects of their own satisfaction levels.

The present article reveals how far the consumers are willing to go in order to build a system of beliefs, habits, purchase decision, patterns of information, designed to maximize their satisfaction and use the social, economic benefits of technology in medical area.

2. Globalization – characteristics and perspectives

Ever since the 70s, together with the liberalization of commerce of services especially in the field of telecommunications, insurance and banking, it has started the issue of the globalization phenomenon which caught at the beginning the U.S.A. and the developed countries, being far from over nowadays (Mirela Mazil, 2010, p. 135). Globalization influences all countries and purposes of activity.

Globalization is the system of interaction among the countries of the world, in order to develop global economy, referring to the integration of economy and companies worldwide.

Globalization supposes technological, economic, political, cultural exchanges which were possible to the largest extent due to the progress in communication, transportation and infrastructure.

Thomas L. Friedman made popular the term of “flat world”, arguing that the globalization of the trade, the identification of the natural resources in other places than the national perimeter, the change of the supply and the political forces modify permanently the world, both for the best and for the worst. He asserted that the rhythm of the globalization was accelerated and that the impact on the organization of business and the lives would continue to grow (Friedman, Thomas L., 2008, p. 49).

Most of the time, the globalization is deemed as a process of homogenization and standardization. As far as services are concerned, however, where the personnel is important and the consumer has his own consumption culture, this process is sensibly different, since the supplies cannot be homogenized.

Limiting the complexity of the globalization phenomenon, we consider that it is inadequate and probably it would be more adequate to have a perspective to interpret the globalization as a simple hybridization process. The hybridization can

be conceptualized, both at the structural level, as new forms of cooperation, and at the cultural level – through the development of new cultures, as specific mixtures (Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 1994, p. 161). One may talk about an opening of cultural spaces, different exchanges redefining the classical barriers and transforming a new cultural pace through hybridization in something totally different from a simple homogenization of several cultures.

The homogenization, at its core, dilutes the possible differences, imposes a standard and reduces to common denominator the values; the hybridization may seem a concept closer to the way in which the development of the life itself made possible the evolution in all its wonder.

By hybridization, the process of globalization earns some “universality”, comes closer to the natural side of evolution, it is not a mere conglomerate of homogenized cultures but a new hybrid cultural form which combined, in an intelligent manner, the different aspects and intensified their uniqueness through a mutual completion.

The globalization represents, thus, the process of creating connections between the world states, representing the phenomenon by which events and activities deploying in one part of the world are reflected on the companies in other parts of the world (Dunning John H., Hamdani Khalil A., 1997, p. 13).

The suppression of the customs duties, the free movement of people and goods, the transfers of technology, as well as the free penetration on the international markets represent some basic features of globalization.

The process of globalization needs clearly superior raw materials, accessible money resources and state of the art technologies, all of which made available at costs lower than before.

In the field of information technologies and communication, the technological processes play the part of connecting and bringing people closer together, both in time and space, making possible new ways of doing business and changing radically the social interactions.

An essential part in the evolution of globalization and global consumption culture has been played by modernized media, such as satellite television and the Internet. Altogether, globalization stimulated economic growth and implicitly the growth of the standard of living for the people worldwide, as a consequence of the extension of markets, new technologies and original ways of doing business. Hence, the people with the most advantages are the people with large income and university degrees and the way in which globalization is perceived varies according to the people’s capacity to benefit from the opportunities arising.

In the last years, as far as the economic policies promoted by the developing countries and the counters with transition economy are concerned, the liberalization of the commercial flows has been the main topic of discussion. Consequently, almost all the countries have taken measures to eliminate or diminish the instruments pertaining to the direct and control policies of the border transactions. They have larger market mechanisms at the internal level and remodeled or reconstructed institution frameworks including on the financial and labour markets, allowing the free play of the market forces. The countries who had

a better position were able to benefit from new business, trade and investment opportunities, the extension of strategic alliances at the international level, resulting thus in a significant economic growth. On the other hand, the less developed countries, apart from not being able to benefit from the opportunities given by globalization, had to face its effects and look more into it.

3. Features of the modern consumer in the context of globalization

Globalization determined new features of the consumer's behavior, in general (Michael J. Baker, 2003, p. 19-22). In particular, for medical services, one may note among the features of the modern consumer, the following:

- today's consumer is much more educated and has access to more information, being at the same time exposed to the suggestions coming from the group they belong to or the reference group; they are less likely than before to be influenced by the absolute power of the direct communication with the physician or the personnel providing medical and healthcare services. The absolute truth value of the physician's advice and indications is filtered and diminished by the consumer's information experience and the increased capacity to communicate in real time with the members of the group;

- the consumer needs, more than in the past, the others' opinion (as they have the capacity to get it) and additional information; they are more prepared when it comes to purchasing goods or services, hence the need to be more careful in the field of services, for such services to be more tangible and to create a sustainable brand and better communication between the provider and the customer; if the organizations fail to make efforts to communicate better, the consumer will try to get information somewhere else, and such information may be distorted (coming from the competition, for example);

- the global market is much more fragmented and the consumers are more heterogenous. The consumption experiences of each consumer are multiple and varied, and on a global market with harsh competition, where each consumer, although different from the others, the division of the market into consumer segments it is important, that have the same consumption traits on which the same marketing mix acts is no longer achievable with notable results. The culture is different but also the value of history, origins and human nature, personal now, is not considered as belonging to one nation but they are part of the demand of the global consumers who can be friends and have strong and lasting relations with people of any nationality;

- the consumers are more involved in producing goods and services as they are active producers of products and services together with the producers, helping the latter in offering a greater value and a greater consumption satisfaction; the present consumers are more actively involved in the process of introducing products on the market, the consumers creating thus their symbols and becoming loyal consumers of the products for which they participated to the creative process;

- the human subject is a cognitive subject no longer preoccupied with himself but becoming a subject with a greater availability for communication, the

individuals conceive themselves as self-developed and self-constructed. The consumer is no longer the individual who needs to be told what to consume and to be informed on what is new, the present consumer gets involved in creating products and services, in socializing with others and in permanently and rapidly communicating their experiences. They are more involved, more informed, more communicative;

– the present consumer is more exigent and wants unique consumption experiences more than unifying consumption experiences.

4. Particularities of dental medical services in the context of globalization

The globalization and the technological progress brought about the problem of the concept of e-health and identifying the present role of the organization providing health services within this process. The concept of e-health covers a whole series of complex processes by which the health services are automated not only at the level of the available data about patients but also at the level of medical procedures, GPS technology, etc., in order to deliver remote medical services at minimum costs and maximum interoperability between different national health insurance systems.

Ever since the 60s, the Federal Government of the United States of America has invested millions of Dollars in different ways in the department of the automation and medical information and promotion of telemedicine (Josep M. Piqué, 2010).

The contents of the e-health process is also characterized by the fact that the decision-making processes are based especially on quality information and knowledge, there is a continuity of the medical data and also a continuity of the medical care, and its integration.

There is the possibility of providing free and uniform access to medical information within the network, regardless of the geographical position, one can get online diagnosis in real time from several specialists simultaneously, there is the possibility of providing better quality control of procedures, the almost limitless possibility of storing data, the possibility of sharing data among specialists both for treatment and for examinations, lesser costs, and last but not least, the possibility to implement a better management of the relation with the consumers (Joshua Shemer, 2010).

The practical activity referring to telemedicine may be composed of a series of elements such as: “electronic laboratory”, “electronic prescriptions”, “electronic diagnosis”, tele-ophthalmology, tele-examination, remote monitoring of chronic patients, call-centre for medical support, and customized web site for each patient.

The e-health systems may be appreciated as interoperable, also the electronic prescription systems represent extremely beneficial investments at the economic and social level but in most cases there is a need of capital infusions at the upper level in order for efficient objectives to be reached.

The role of globalization determined by the free movement of goods, people and money will be major in the development of dental medicine. It is no longer

news the participation in specialized conferences of specialists all over the world, by webcams, in real time, without any need of people actually moving. In the near future maybe they will use webcams in the dental practice and a certain dental specialist may advice a different specialist (for example ENT) while their patient is in the room. Also, the patient may have a serious problem and be in a different country and they can call their physician in Romania, and show them on webcam what their afflictions are. The dentist may explain to them the treatment to relief the pain until they come back to the country.

In the last years, ever more, an important part at the level of health services, and implicitly at the level of medical dental services, has been played by the social media communication techniques.

Different types of media, both traditional and social media, condition reciprocally and have a major impact on the marketing activity. Thus one may speak about a parallel between the integrated media concept and the integrated marketing communication concept, the relation between the 2 types of media (traditional and social) being similar, from this point of view, to the relation between publicity and promotion of sales within the same integrated marketing communication strategy (Andrew T. Stephen, Jeff Galak, 2010).

Also, one may say that the media delivery spaces, both traditional and social, are part of an informal network or a delivery system. In this network, the media delivery areas are “knots” and the directional “relations” reflect the influence of one area on the other.

For example a piece of information on a certain topic (let’s say brand) appears on a blog, it may be taken over by a central newspaper and it may appear in its edition the second day. The dynamics of the information is presently very intense at the level of social media networks where millions of users grouped into interest classes communicate on daily and usual basis.

Social media may be defined presently as the use of electronic and internet specific instruments by different people with the view to sharing and discussing information with other individuals.

If at the beginning there was a unidirectional control of information, by pushing the contents towards the user, we can speak now about a “dialogue” by attracting the customer to the message.

The social media communication networks offer now a precious marketing instrument for the specific procedure of medical marketing. The social topics (as those referring to health) are very interesting subjects on blogs, discussion groups, on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn. This, together with the importance users give to information coming from friends, etc., as compared to the information coming from the classical channels (a report of AC Nielsen published in 2007 shows that 14 percent of the consumers trusted classical promotion, whereas 78 percent trusted opinions and recommendations coming from other consumers) determine the need to include the medical instruments specific to social media in the marketing strategies of medical institutions (Andrew T. Stephen, Jeff Galak, 2010).

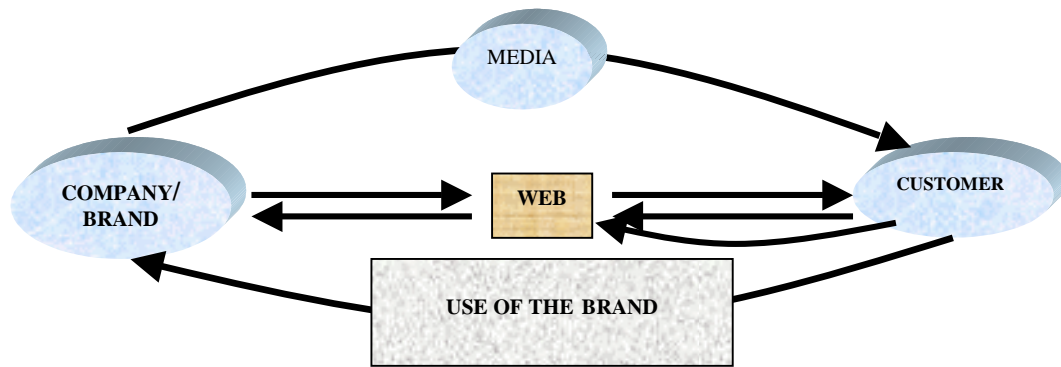


Fig. 1. *The new model of communicating media experience by user generated messages – a two-way dialogue by media channels*

A series of data are revealing for the ever growing potential of internet socializing in the promotion of medical services (Zwick Detlev, Dholakia Nikhilesh, 2004):

- 98 percent of physicians search for information online;
- 85 percent of physicians use the internet before or after the work schedule;
- 49 percent of physicians use internet between the examinations of patients;
- 23 percent of physicians use internet during examinations for certain patients;
- 88 percent of physicians consider the internet as a specific specialty information source;
- 52 percent of physicians currently use smart phones and PDAs;
- SERMO – an online service for physicians has 30,000 members and is increasing;
- 75 percent of the members of this service are physicians with the age over 45.

All these data indicate a very good penetration of internet technology and associated communication at the level of physicians' professional communication. The modern doctor is a highly cultured individual, not only as far as the profession is concerned, who integrated successfully the internet technology in their daily professional preoccupations; this type of social media communication channels, the networking, becomes more important in the context of the relations between the specialists and even the patient and the physician.

Sharing positive or negative experiences about medical services with the help of internet socializing networks is only at the beginning. It is possible that, considering the continuous tendency of internet to become a live informational medium connected to the daily life of each person, to witness an unprecedented development of e-health medical services, combined with the support of the online community of specialists.

More and more dental practices in Romania have created discussion forums and they are present on the social networks, to be available to their patients with answers on dental hygiene matters. At the same time, the consumers in turn may create forums and discussions groups and they may connect with other patients and get information on dental hygiene techniques and dental treatment performed by clinics all over the world.

Due to the globalization, patients may be quickly informed on physicians and their services, they may receive recommendations from other patients and they may get fast at the services provision area.

Thus, there is a new notion – that of dental tourism. In Romania, the number of practices making appointments and schedules in certain periods of the year mainly for foreign patients is ever growing. There are dental clinics that make contracts and agreements with travel tour-operating agencies to combine dental treatment with visiting our country for foreigners.

Also, there are tourism agencies specializing only on dental tourism. Among the advantages offered by such tourism agencies, there are the following: they compare the average dental costs in each country, for each procedure and they are updated and also, they determine a lump price that is lower than the price that the person would get only for travelling; they offer also the possibility to get easily and comfortably to a country where there are less expensive dental treatments; the collaboration between the dental practices and the tourism agency guarantees that the dentists will communicate in English and the tourists will have the guarantee of quality medical dental services. Also, bearing in mind the arguments above, patients may find the dentist with the best recommendations on the most advantageous price.

Each patient may communicate early with the dentist and they can have x-rays and send them electronically so that the dentists schedules them informing them on the length and duration of the treatment, thus the patient will have the time to visit the new country where the dental practice is situated, as well.

Together with the globalization and the new technologies, new ways to approach direct marketing communication at the level of healthcare services – emotional marketing, have arisen.

Hospitals and other healthcare services providing institutions presently operate in a highly computational environment. Many times, the same symptom or affliction may be treated with tens of brands of medicines with equivalent active substances, healing principles, etc.

In this context, the functional benefits or brands in the medical field, such as technology, physicians-researchers or contact personnel are associated with the notion of entry costs. In order to differentiate a brand from the competitors it is necessary to deeply understand the reasons to determine the decisions to purchase and the behavior.

For the medical service provider, the effort to inspire preferences for their own brand represents the emphasis on what really motivates the target audience – basic emotions, such as: denial, anxiety, relief and hope.

These emotions are both positive and negative; they have an enormous impact on patients' actions while they are searching for information on health, assistance or mere care.

The right (correct) message may help in the transformation of denial to comprehension, of anxiety to trust, the evolution of relief to trust and inspire hope and a feeling of personal power.

At the basis of developing an efficient direct marketing strategy there will be the principle by which the emotion motivates the behavior. Thus, the development of a strategy to communicate emotions in a natural manner and help consumers control their emotions and evolve in their complex area represents one of the greatest challenges in the field of marketing, generally, and in the field of health services, especially.

Bearing in mind the fundamental scope of social marketing – the change of the behaviors at the level of the individual and/or society, the application of marketing techniques will envisage not only the change of perceptions for a brand or another but also the emotional behavior, regardless of the loyalty to the brand.

Nonetheless, the promotion of a change in the emotional register of the consumer determined a sincere and natural preference towards the brand inspiring such process.

In the field of health services, due to the complexity of these services, the emotional loyalty is very strong, the decisions to buy and the preferences will be influenced several times by what the patient "feels" and not by what they understand or reason, as far as symptoms, treatment, locations and human interaction.

These behavior modifications, as those described above, represent a desire that should be the background of each procedure which focuses on the provision of medical services.

Conclusion

The way in which the globalization is perceived by each individual and nation separately is reflected both in the standard of living they have and their possibility to face the changes consequent to this phenomenon which evolves continually.

The easier access to the health services, a better communication between the patient and the physician as well as the active involvement of the patients in the medical field makes this phenomenon of globalization both controversial and ample, to the good meaning of the word, the result being the globalized human being, opened to what is new and ready to face any change.

In the promotion of medical services, the use of the Internet plays an important part as far as the consumption behavior is concerned as well as his possibility to select the best services at the most beneficial price.

It would be interesting to see the particularities of the behavior of the Romanian consumer of medical services pursuant to the EU adhesion and the access to a space of the global market.

One must bear in mind that the consumers cannot be homogenized and the dentists must consider that their future depends not only on the Romanian consumer but also on the “global consumer” and that is why they must think globally in order to attract consumers all over the world. At the same time, they must act bearing in mind the particularities of each individual or the particularities of the local community. Even if the globalization has a huge impact due to the elimination of borders between states, it cannot homogenize consumers in the true meaning of the word. In their future researches, the authors propose themselves to identify the particularities of the consumers per local communities and interest groups.

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