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**STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH
CUSTOMERS IN ONLINE PHARMACIES AS LINKS
OF PHARMACEUTICAL VALUE NETWORKS**

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An effective management strategy in today's highly competitive environment is strengthening long-term relationships with customers. The essence of this strategy is building and developing relationships with customers on the principle of mutual benefit aiming to achieve higher customer satisfaction and loyalty. An important role in strengthening the relationships with customers is played by information technologies; in recent years the Internet has become increasingly important in this area. This article presents the results of a primary qualitative research, which focused on defining the appropriate forms and tools for strengthening customer relationships in online pharmacies and the extent of their application in the Czech Republic, evaluating their effectiveness and possibilities of their further use in developing relationships with customers.

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Introduction

Changes in a market environment are becoming more and more frequent and deeper. There is a whole range of causes; the main ones include a broad development of technologies, especially the information technologies, and a deepening process of globalization. The changed market environment brings business entities new opportunities and threats. We live in a knowledge-based society, where, thanks to the technologies, information is widely available in near real-time. The changes in the marketplace cause a significant growth of customer requirements and an increase in the intensity of competition on the one hand, while on the other hand they allow businesses to reach with their offer a substantially broader range of customers and find a sufficiently large segment of the market even for a highly specialized business area.

Customer needs and requirements are changing rapidly. Customers are becoming more informed and their demands are growing. They expect increasingly sophisticated and new products. The surplus of supply over demand contributes to the fact that their loyalty is low. They want to satisfy their needs in the best possible and easiest way in the highly competitive environment. It is up to companies to develop such solutions that the target customers will subjectively perceive as advantageous in the long term, i.e., with a higher value than the competitors offer. It is necessary for businesses to become consistently more customer-controlled companies [1]. This requires:

- maximum individualization of the offer and creation of the value for the customer with regard to the value of the customer for the enterprise,
- comprehensive and rapid solutions to the customer needs and requirements,
- focus on the strategic (relational) level of cooperation with the customer, not just on individual/particular business transactions,
- building long-term equilibrium relationships with customers and their management,
- strengthening relationships with customers through such tools and forms that will increase their loyalty based on emotions,
- collaboration with customers to create the value, i.e. involvement of customers in the process of value creation,
- cooperation in creating the value for the customer not only within the company, but also with entities outside the firm,
- creating the value not only for the immediate customers, but also cooperation in creating the value for other entities of the chain or network, as the case may be, to final consumers,
- use of information technologies throughout the process of detection, creation and improvement of the value for customers, i.e., not only for collecting, processing and analyzing information, but also, among other things, for active communication with customers.

These requirements follow from the philosophy of differentiated customer relationship management and value management and are based on a comprehensively conceived value for the customer.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a business philosophy to which all the business processes must be adapted. Its essence is creating, maintaining and strengthening relations especially with the “right” customers with the aim to increase their satisfaction and loyalty based on emotions. A key aspect of CRM is to create such a relationship with the customer that will be strong and will bring the company the highest possible value [2]. The aim is therefore to actively create and maintain long-term beneficial relationships with customers [3]. It is an interactive process aimed at achieving a balance between corporate investments and the satisfaction of customer needs [4], i.e., the value for the customer and the customer value for the enterprise. Since customers differ in terms of their values, it is necessary to manage relations with customers differently.

The value for the customer is one of two mutually conditional components of the customer value. Individualized care is a prerequisite for achieving extraordinary benefits and ensuring long-term prosperity of the company and, on the contrary, the degree of adaptability of products and services and intensity of cooperation and relations (the size of the value provided to the customer) depend on the customer contributions to the enterprise (i.e., the value of the customer for the firm). The both components of the value must be in a long-term equilibrium, only then both sides will have an interest in maintaining and developing the relationship.

In general terms, the value for the customer is defined as a relationship between the degree of satisfaction of needs and the amount of resources spent by the customer to achieve this satisfaction [5]. It is a result of the customer’s subjective comparison of attributes of the utility (from the product, the service, the relationship) with the perceived attributes associated with the sacrifice and cost [4].

Customers consider not only benefits resulting from the parameters of the actual product and its price, but they evaluate the product comprehensively, i.e. including services, possible discounts, payment, delivery and warranty terms, the method of distribution and communication, and also the image of the manufacturer and reputation of the brand. Similarly comprehensively they evaluate the resources they spent, i.e., not only the price they paid but also the effort they made, costs associated with the use and disposal of the product at the end of its lifetime, etc. However, the value for customers is made not only by transactional benefits and costs, i.e., effects of normal commercial transactions, but, increasingly, also by strategic (relational) benefits. The strategic benefits are such steps and services that lead to strengthening the strategic position of customers in the markets [6] or, as the case may be, to strengthening trust and loyalty of end users. Therefore, they lead to strengthening and developing the cooperation and long-term relationships with customers within the all value network up to the final consumers. These are

the effects of different forms of joint ventures, strengthening the competitive position of the customer etc. Similarly, various forms of customer care contribute to the value for the customer, especially on its emotional level. Strategy, which allows to significantly strengthen relationships, is a comprehensive solution to the customer's problem. There is a need for the offer to cover not only a group of mutually complementary products and their distribution, but also a help with the deployment and the use of a product or service. Overall, this means that an increasing emphasis is put on the relational level of cooperation. This was reflected in the transition from the value-for-the-customer management to the customer relationship value management where the strategic benefits are an important part of the benefits provided.

It is necessary to manage the value for the customer (the relationship value). Value management is currently perceived as a dynamic process of creating, providing and improving the value for the customer through business processes, people, skills, resources and capital. It is a sequence of five continuously repeating phases, i.e., to discover, commit, create, assess, and improve [7,8]. It is about permanent identifying customer needs and requirements and quick response to them not just in terms of common transactions, but increasingly on the level of deepening cooperation and strengthening relations.

Strengthening Customer Relationships

In a highly competitive environment, an increasing emphasis must be placed on maintaining and strengthening good relations especially with existing customers. In these conditions, this strategy is more effective for businesses than acquiring new customers. Long-term relationships are usually more valuable than short-term ones, because taking the care of existing customers is cheaper than acquiring the new ones [9]. On the other hand, the nature of the current market environment means that a customer loyalty is minimal. Businesses must therefore make enormous efforts and explore new tools and procedures to keep the right, i.e., valuable, customers. It is not enough to focus on making sure that a product in its comprehensive concept brings a high added value to the customers. An increasingly important role in their purchase decision-making process is played by emotional factors. Starting from efforts to meet the minimum customer requirements, through a focus on excellent quality and value as the relationship between benefits and sacrifices, enterprises gradually came up to focus on loyalty (perceived as a behaviour that is based on strong preferences), and subsequently also to a higher dimension of its strength, i.e. loyalty based on emotions [2]. Through the emotional dimension, the customer loyalty gains a new meaning. In fact, the importance of emotions lies in their persistence [1].

According to Burnet, four main methods to achieve overall development and

strengthening relationships with customers can be found [10]:

- creating a personal relationship of trust between the customer and the supplier,
- creating an entry barrier against the competitors,
- reinforcing output barriers for the customer,
- initialization of joint venture projects that will contribute to achieving the objectives of the customer.

Basically, it is about the increasing importance of the emotional component of the relationships on the one hand and creating dependencies and barriers for the customer to leave on the other. Trust is the primary condition for the development of all the relationships and their strengthening. Customer confidence is increased particularly by open communication, reliability, quality counseling, sharing problems, alerting potential problems, enabling customers to become familiar with the operating space of the company, but also by a reasonable number of contacts, social events and activities focused on spending a leisure time, special events for customers etc. Another way to strengthen relationships with customers is to create entry barriers for competitors such as timely delivery of superior products and services, keeping low prices, offering financial services and fair communication with customers, openness to customers, customer's participation in creating products and services etc. The strength of the customer relationship is also affected by their dependence on suppliers. Suitable forms of strengthening barriers to customers are loyalty programs, renting replacement equipment, organizing customer clubs, providing special trainings etc.

The strength of the relationship with customers is significantly influenced by the level and the quality of the customer care. It is based on the knowledge of client requirements and needs, and the ability of their rapid and high quality satisfaction. The feeling of the utmost care is an indicator of the strength of the relationship between the supplier and the customer. The effective forms of customer care in the communications sphere include a customer information lines, discussion forums, newsletters, greeting cards and letters, customer cards, providing information on the status of orders or complaints or an option to monitor its course directly by the customer etc. Other important tools include a longer warranty period, high speed of handling complaints and claims, providing transportation and installation, allowing discounts, renting of replacement equipment, providing financial services etc. Important elements are also taking care of specific groups of customers in the form of children's corners, helping disabled people or foreigners.

An important role in the customer care is played by loyalty programs. The essence of these programs is in an effort to influence the customer to ensure his loyalty to the company or a product brand [11], i.e., creating a long-term and stronger relationship between the customer and the supplier. Loyalty programs allow to obtain information about customers that can be used, after their processing

and analysis, for further strengthening the relationships. There are basically 3 types of loyalty programs — pricing (special prices for members of the system), points (based on allocation of points for a certain value of the purchase; these points then provide customers with discounts or bonuses) and partnership model (based on the principle of the point program, but run jointly with multiple partners) [11].

In the current conditions, strengthening relationships with customers must be supported by the Internet. Through the Internet, marketing now allows considerably more personal attention, care for each particular/individual customer and an option to individualize the offer. The Internet allows to obtain more data about customers and communicate with them basically non-stop, to address customers in several ways at the same time, to approach them individually and to update continuously the offer. The biggest changes the Internet has induced, however, are those in marketing communication, which contributes more intensely than ever before to developing relationships with customers.

In relation to customers, the marketing communication on the Internet has 4 goals — to inform, influence, induce action and maintain the relationship; away from the customer it can obtain information about their purchases, about their requirements and needs and information about the customers themselves [12]. Marketing communication tools on the Internet can be divided into these areas [12]:

- advertising (PPC advertising - pay-per-click, PPA advertising - pay-per-action, space advertising, entries in catalogues, priority listings),
- public relations (news, articles, viral marketing etc.),
- direct marketing (e-mailing, web seminars, VoIP telephony, online chat),
- sales support (incentives for the purchase in the form of competitions, discounts, loyalty and partner programs),
- events (online events).

Tools used for strengthening customer relationships have been investigated in online pharmacies in the Czech Republic.

Characteristics of Questionnaire Research on Strengthening Relationships with Customers of online Pharmacies

The research objective was to find out what forms and tools for strengthening customer relationships are currently used in online pharmacies in the Czech Republic, what their effectiveness according to their owners is and what are the possibilities of their further use in strengthening customer relationships.

The primary qualitative research was conducted by Internet interviewing the complete set of the online pharmacy owners who currently operated an Internet pharmacy. The respondents were selected from a list of 150 online pharmacies

registered in the Czech Republic that had been listed in the Czech State Institute for Drug Control registry [13]. All owners (137) of online pharmacies who currently operated Internet sales of freely marketable pharmacy range were addressed.

The questionnaire was created using Google Documents program, which allows for its online completion and dispatch. The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts: I – Description of Internet pharmacy websites, II – Forms of strengthening relationships with customers on the website of online pharmacies and III – General characteristics of the online pharmacy. The questionnaire used both closed and open questions. Attitudes were measured on 5-point scales.

The content of the questionnaire was to some extent influenced by legal requirements and other conditions which online pharmacies and their websites must comply with. Online pharmacies can be operated in the Czech Republic only by “brick and mortar” pharmacies that ensure compliance with statutory and other conditions of sale, storage and distribution of drugs. Internet pharmacies provide mail order of commercially available medications and nutritional supplements in the Czech Republic and abroad and must therefore meet the legal requirements for mail-order sales. The websites of pharmacies must therefore contain the information required for the operation of mail-order sales.

The research took place during March and April 2011. The total of 22 of the 137 pharmacies surveyed responded to the questionnaire, which is about 16 %. The questions in the questionnaire were answered by 21 of them, i.e., the return of the completed questionnaire is 15.3 %. In the questionnaire, there were several issues that were not answered or were answered by only a very small number of respondents.

With the exception of the open-ended questions, evaluation of the research was carried out using the IBM statistical program SPSS, Version 19. Given the number of respondents willing to complete the questionnaire, we cannot generalize the results of the research, but the results can be considered as a probe into the issue.

The Research Results - Forms of Strengthening Relations with Customers on Websites of online Pharmacies

The questions in this part of the questionnaire were answered by 21 online pharmacies. An analysis of the general characteristics of the respondents shows that in the research participated mainly pharmacies focused on a wide range of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs and nutritional supplements (9, i.e., 42.9 %) and pharmacies that want to achieve that status (7, i.e., 33.3 %), the rest was aimed at a selected assortment of over-the-counter (OTC) medications and nutritional supplements. Most pharmacies offer up to 2,000 products (13, i.e., almost 62 %),

the widest range, i.e., over 5,000 products, was offered by 4 pharmacies (19 %). The pharmacies had been usually run for 2 to 3 years (the total of 14, i.e., 66.6 %), the longest period of operation of a pharmacy is 10 or more years. The focus of a pharmacy is related to the width of its assortment, i.e., the broader the focus of pharmacy is, the wider range of OTC medicines and nutritional supplements it offers. On the contrary, the dependence between the product range and operation time of online pharmacies was not confirmed, i.e., it does not mean that the extension of operation time increases the breadth of OTC medicines and nutritional supplements offered by the pharmacy.

In the section focused on forms used to strengthen relationships with customers, the respondents were to answer 17 questions. The questions concerned the following areas — advertising, direct marketing, public relations and sales support focused on their use for strengthening customer relationships.

More than a half (12 pharmacies) use product advertising on their websites, a half of them reinvests into it only up to 5 % of the turnover, with only two pharmacies on the contrary reinvesting more than 15 % of their turnover. Most pharmacies use more than one type of advertising. The respondents prefer advertisements placed on the Internet. The most frequently used type of advertising is PPC advertising — it is used by 12 pharmacies (57.1 % of respondents) and banner advertising (10 pharmacies, i.e. 47.6 %), while, on the contrary, advertising on radio and television is used very little or not at all. The PPC advertising and banner advertising are also rated by the respondents as the most effective. Effective (especially in terms of image) is considered advertising in the press in the form of counseling in the shape of answers to readers' questions. Almost a fifth of the pharmacies (4) does not use any kind of advertising. Advertising aimed at brand building (brand advertising) is used only by 3 pharmacies.

The respondents also rated the tools used for direct marketing. Their answers indicated that communication tools such as telephone, e-mail and SMS are used in the pharmacies mainly for everyday communication with customers. A telephone number for communication with clients is given by all the respondents, with almost half of them allowing to call this number for free (10 pharmacies, i.e., 47.6 %). The use of telephone communications by their customers was rated on a five-point scale by the respondents (1 – not at all, 5 – very often) with 3 being the most often given value. The phone is primarily used for price verification and product availability and to receive orders. To a lesser extent, it is used to solve technical problems with an order, to help make an order, to provide further information about e-pharmacy, confirmation of the personal contact for receipt of the product, for specification of product information and advice on medicines and food supplements. Communication by telephone is thus used more as a tool for solving technical problems and problems with orders and the actual sale, rather than as a tool for consulting. More often used are toll-free telephone lines.

Although e-mailing and SMS are direct marketing tools, the answers to open

questions showed that the respondents perceived them rather as a means of everyday communication with customers to solve common problems. E-marketing is used by 12 respondents (60 %). Communication via e-mail is used frequently, even more than communication via phone. E-mail is used for informing customers (about special offers, discounts, etc.), but mainly for addressing their problems and counseling. SMS marketing is used only by a fifth of respondents, and moreover these usually consider it to be ineffective. SMS is used for its flexibility — especially for informing about current news and possibilities how to pick up goods. Other tools of direct marketing, which we asked about directly — the use of webinars and online chat — are not used by the respondents. Neither anyone mentioned that they would use another form of direct marketing that was marked as the “other” category.

An important role in the purchase of medicines is played by counseling. Online counseling as a form of strengthening relationships with customers is used by 12 pharmacies, 11 of them evaluated its use by their customers. The respondents do not have a unified view of the use of online consulting by their clients, but they rated it most often on a 5-point scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very often) with the 2 value. Counseling is used primarily for advice on disease prevention and accuracy of taking medication.

The customers’ awareness is also aided by publishing of special articles. Expert articles on their websites are stated only by less than 25 % (5) Internet pharmacies. Their read-rate was consistently rated with 3 on a 5-point scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very often).

Few pharmacies use inquiries as forms of strengthening customer relationships (5 respondents). Evaluation of its use on a 5-point scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very often) was very different. Willingness of customers to fill out the inquiries was evaluated by the respondents positively. The surveys deal with product popularity rating, selection of products to discounts or choice of topics for articles.

Common tools of sales promotion include primarily competitions and loyalty programs. Competitions as a form of strengthening relationships with customers are used by a minimum of pharmacies (3). The respondents do not share the same opinion on evaluation of the rate of customer participation. Rewards to customers for their participation in the competitions include selected products or discount coupons for the next purchase.

Only eight respondents use some form of loyalty programs. Evaluation of the rate of customer usage of the loyalty programs (1 – not at all, 5 – very often) was 3 most often. When evaluating the benefit terms of loyalty programs for customers, the respondents mentioned especially various cost advantages and gifts. Five pharmacies use gifts as a form of reward, while other forms — points/credits for a certain order size, discounts on future purchases and coupons for future purchases is always used only by 1 respondent. Their evaluation is mostly positive. The merits of these programs are positively evaluated even by most of those who

do not yet use them. Those who use some form of loyalty programs mostly evaluate their other forms better too.

Only 6 online pharmacies prepare printed leaflets for their customers. Leaflets are used primarily to inform clients about time-limited special product offerings and other discount sales. According to one of the pharmacies, the leaflets are too expensive and with an insignificant response by customers, another one only issues them on special occasions such as Christmas.

A tremendous way to acquire new customers, communicate and strengthen relationships with them is provided by social networks. Social networks are co-created by users, opinions on products and companies are made there and people often validate their experiences there. It is very appropriate to engage in social networks and communicate with customers through them, highlight products and raise awareness about the online pharmacy. They also allow gaining customers' opinions and suggestions for further improvement of Internet pharmacies [15]. Eight respondents make use of social networks in their marketing activities. All the 8 pharmacies use Face book, four of them also YouTube, one uses Liner while Twitter is not used by either of them. Face book is considered to be the most effective one. Through social networking, the online pharmacies provide current information and inform about special offers, use them for advertising purposes and highlight news and special events designed just for fans of Face book. Some pharmacies, which are not yet involved in social networks, are going to soon become their members.

Finally, respondents were asked to evaluate satisfaction with their online pharmacies. Seven of 20 representatives of the online pharmacies regard the online pharmacy operate as inferior to the brick-and-mortar pharmacy operation. On the contrary, 10 respondents consider the operation of online pharmacies better and 3 were not able to assess it. Respondents are, therefore, generally satisfied with the operation of their online pharmacies more than with the operation of the brick-and-mortar ones. The respondents gave the following reasons for their assessment: online pharmacies require a lower cost than brick-and-mortar ones, there is a lesser need for storage of supplies and generally a less demanding operation. The respondents consider appropriate a combination of both the types of pharmacies, although some understand the online one only as "a little extra for customers of the brick and mortar pharmacy". Some respondents were unable to express their satisfaction because their online pharmacies are still in their infancy. There was also an opinion that "the brick-and-mortar pharmacy is the basic pharmacists' activity" and customers need to be treated rather personally. The internet pharmacy is only an ancillary activity for them.

The starting point for effective customer relationship management is the collecting, processing and analyzing of data about customers and their shopping behavior. The respondents were, therefore, asked whether they conducted regular analysis of their internet pharmacy operation (e.g., with the measuring tool Google

Analytics). These analyses are conducted on a regular basis by twelve of the twenty responding pharmacies, i.e., 60 %.

Conclusion

The analysis of the data revealed that there is a relatively large proportion of Internet/online pharmacies which are only at the beginning of their operation. This may explain the fact that different forms of strengthening customer relationships are not yet sufficiently utilized. The online pharmacies that participated in the survey can be generally divided into three groups according to the extent and breadth they use different forms of strengthening customer relationships.

The first group can include four to five online pharmacies that use all or almost all available forms of strengthening relationships with customers, evaluate them as frequently used and are satisfied with them. Overall, the owners are satisfied with the operation and success rate of their pharmacy, reinvesting a portion of sales back to the pharmacy and trying to not only maintain the current level of pharmacy, but rather to expand customer services and improve the website environment and services. These pharmacies provide their customers with a wide range of products and have been in the market work for more than two years [14].

The second group includes about seven pharmacies that make use of only certain forms of strengthening customer relationships. They assess the success rate of individual forms and how often the customers use these services usually with 3 on a 1 to 5 scale. They either cannot assess the overall success rate of their pharmacy or they are only rather satisfied or sometimes satisfied, sometimes dissatisfied. These pharmacies are according to the range of products included in all the groups and are younger than three years. With some of them, the smaller extent of customer services used is caused by the fact that they are younger than 1 year and are only in their infancy. When asked about a particular service, these young pharmacies often state that they do not yet provide it, but they are going to put it into operation [14].

The last group includes pharmacies that use only a few forms of strengthening relationships with customers, not reinvesting into the online pharmacy and evaluating the success rate as rather worse. These online pharmacies were probably created just to cover this area of the market by the brick-and-mortar pharmacy, but it is not their owner's priority. This group includes pharmacies with different range of products and three years old or less [14].

The research has shown that the representatives of a number of Internet pharmacies realize the importance of deepening relationships with their clients and stated that in the future they will expand the services provided and introduce other forms of strengthening relationships with clients. They also asked for more information from this area in order to further develop their activities and improve

their services.

Given that mostly owners of younger pharmacies were engaged in the research, it is expected that there will be further strengthening of relationships with customers in the future. This is also evidenced by the fact that the respondents reported in their replies that they do not have enough information and experience in strengthening the relationships with their customers, asking for the research results and expressing interest in training and additional information in this field.

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