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Uncovering the Online Marketing Mix Communication for Health Care Services

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Abstract

Any marketplace, nowadays, is made out of a crowded environment of businesses which provide almost the same services. New organizations enter the market on a daily basis without knowing they will survive. The help for organizations to distinguish their services from the ones offered by their competition comes in the shape of one “P”, *marketing communications*. Communication is the most visible and audible component of the marketing mix, which used wisely, may bring many advantages. Further, organizations include descriptive elements in their communication messages such as the nature of their activities, the benefits consumers would have and other elements which help consumers “tangibilize” the services provided. Many businesses moved from the offline environment to the online, becoming more consumer oriented. For an organization to both succeed and survive, it is essential to find the balance, the ideal mix between the services it offers in the real world and its online communications. For example, in health care services consumers are “hooked” by traditional communication tools, experience the service and afterwards use the internet to deliver indirect feedback on their lived experiences. The aim of this paper is to shed light upon the online marketing communications mix applied in health care services.

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1. Health Care Marketing Communications

Kotler (2008) described marketing communications as organizational actions in the shape of messages which target both internal and external audiences, with the objective of influencing peoples’ attitudes and behaviours.

In a service setting, Lovelock and Wirtz (2007), stated that marketing communications have several functions, as follows:

- ❖ Marketing communications help organizations *add value through their content*, meaning that communication may inform prospective consumers about the service options, where and when these

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services are available, what are the specific features, functions and benefits. Moreover, organizations do not use marketing communications only for prospects but also in establishing relationships with their current consumers through tailored messages. For example, in health services, physicians may remind their patients of their next annual check-up.

- ❖ *Overcoming the problems of intangibility* suggests that since services are considered processes or performances, their benefits are difficult to be expressed. Therefore, organizations have to communicate clear messages, emphasizing the attributes of their services as well as the resulted benefits after the service experience. For instance, if a health care organization highlights the attribute of healing as main benefit for their service experience, they should conceive messages which “picture” the healing stage as well as other benefits such as feelings of calmness, distress etc.
- ❖ *Using metaphors to communicate value* indicates that organizations attempt to “tangibilize” their services using metaphorical words in order to express benefits. For example, in health care services, the slogan and the images used to support the slogan are very helpful.
- ❖ Marketing communications *facilitate the consumer involvement in the production and the delivery process of the service*. Most of times, in services, consumers are viewed as co-producers so an organization should train their clients similar to their employees. For example, in health care organizations, animated displays or videos are used to show to their patients certain procedures.
- ❖ Marketing communications *help consumers evaluate service offerings and distinguish between the providers’ offers*. As consequence, in health care services, marketers may highlight in their messages, service attributes related to quality and performance such as highly skilled personnel and the physicians’ qualifications.
- ❖ Marketing communications *stimulate or dampen the match capacity* which suggests that organizations implement time specific promotions which depend on the period of the demand fluctuations. For example, in health care services, marketers may wish to advertise sales promotions like vaccination programs. In Romania, every autumn, many health care organizations offer vaccination services against flu and, accordingly, implement sales promotions as well.
- ❖ Marketing communications *promote the contribution of service personnel*. In high-contact services, such as health care, physicians are the core individuals in the service delivery. Hence, most of times, health care organizations advertise their services with the help of physicians and the description of the service encounter.

Most experts claim that it is not enough to have knowledge only of the marketing communication functions and to, independently, apply communication strategies. Moreover, on today’s markets, in order to be successful, it is recommended to adopt an **integrated marketing communication approach**.

2. Health Care Integrated Marketing Communications

IMC is defined by the American Association of Advertising Agencies as being a “*concept of marketing communication planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates disciplines, e.g. general advertising, direct response, sales promotions and public relations- and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact*” (Duncan, & Everett 1993).

In Gronroos’s (2007) view, the traditional marketing communication efforts, such as advertising and sales, impact the expected service while the integrated marketing communication should impact the process of service experience. In other words, IMC emerged as an approach to understand how other messages, not only the planned ones launched by organizations, impact consumers and potential consumers.

The most important part of the communication process is the message and the elements it contains. According to Duncan and Moriarty (1997), a message may be the outcome of several sources, so they elaborated a message classification, as follows:

- ✓ **Planned messages** are the result of planned marketing communication campaigns which are usually sent through controlled channels such as printed advertising.
- ✓ **Services messages** are the outcome of the service delivery process and are influenced by the conceived service, the appearance, attitude and behaviour of the personnel, the equipment used, the servicescapes.
- ✓ **The unplanned messages** are the result of the experience of consumers with the organization and have the role of an indirect feedback, as the organization cannot control them. We think in health care services,

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