The E-Pharmacy Customer Segmentation Based on the Perceived Importance of the Retention Support Tools

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Abstract

The issue of increasing the e-customer retention and loyalty is now an insufficiently explored area in the literature. The more and more severe competitive environment in the e-business requires a change in the way of working with the market in selling through e-shops, taking account of the supply components and the attractiveness of various forms of incentives to repeat purchase. Within the framework of building long-term relationships with e-customers, our study focuses on the possibilities of customer segmentation based on the perceived importance of the retention support tools used by e-shops, which is an essential prerequisite for differentiated customer relationship management in the area of building the customer loyalty. The paper includes the primary survey performed among the e-pharmacy clients focusing on the perception of the importance of the retention support tools. On the basis of the discovered factors encouraging the customers to buy from the e-shop repeatedly, the market of these customers has been segmented and the profiles of the identified segments have been compiled.

Keywords: Customer Segmentation, Customer Retention, Customer Loyalty, Customer Relationship Management, E-Commerce

1. Introduction

The mass utilization of the internet in 21st century results in significant economic changes. In the changed economy, the internet becomes not only a vast source of information, but also a huge shopping market accessible to anybody and from anywhere (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). The fundamental difference between the internet and the other media consists in the essence of the mutual relationship established between the seller and the buyer. The e-customer has much more control over the process of

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selling, and so the key to success in e-commerce consists in the interactivity in the relationship between the customer and the e-shop. This gives rise to the need to innovate the system of working with the market within selling through e-shops taking account of the changes in the concept of the customer value leading to building the customer loyalty and strengthening the long-term relationships with customers.

An important part of the process of building long-term online customer relations is application of loyalty programs and the other website retention support tools, which are based on repeated visits or purchases. The loyalty programs work with the customers on a long-term basis and bring not only potential repeated purchases, but also valuable information about the customers’ behaviour, which then also serves for improvement of the offered range of products and services. The customer should perceive the added value of the loyalty programs compared to the other, non-registered, customers. This value should mean for them the beginning of emotional association with the company (brand, product), which will then, within the period of using the loyalty program, be developed. Loyalty programs are marketing communication tools and by principle they enable a differentiated approach to the customers (Janouch, 2010). Therefore, they should tend to provide a comprehensive care of a certain group of customers, they should bind the customer for the whole period of the purchase and, at the same time, they should also be connected with communication outside the shop. Moreover, various forms of retention support can be perceived by the customers diversely, and so their use in communication with the customers should be differentiated. It is certainly a better solution than provision of across-the-board benefits without any segmentation of the buyers.

The publications dealing with e-commerce and marketing communication on the internet are usually drawn up from the technical point of view of these problems. They just marginally or not at all describe shopping behaviour of the customers or marketing on these markets. The internet resources dedicated to these problems include lots of low quality and confusing information, which is not supported by any research or outcomes of a long-term practice in this area. That is why this paper aims are to analyse the perceived importance of the retention support tools in e-shops focussing on the possibilities of e-pharmacy customer segmentation. In this context, the study begins with a literature review of the changes in the concept of the customer value, the forms of retention support tools, and then it will continue with development of hypotheses. The research methodology will be specified and the analysis results will be discussed in the next section.

2. Literature Review And Hypotheses Development

2.1. The Changes in the Concept of the Customer Value

In the present highly competitive environment, businesses are forced to change their approaches to entrepreneurial activities. Therefore, they are revising their previous strategies towards offering their customers a new and differentiated value – a value fighting with commoditization and current margin erosion. This requires changes in the ways of servicing markets and creation of a value for customers (Khalifa, 2004; Smith and Colgate, 2007), paying more and more attention to innovations and building long-term relationships with customers (Kannegiesser, M., 2008; Lostakova et al., 2009). The historical trend has gone from perceiving the customer as the closest business partner to a comprehensive perception of the chain/network of customers inside and outside the firm, among which the end user has the privileged position (Branska et al., 2012). An increased value for a customer consists in maximization of the ratio between what the customer gets and what effort he/she has to make to get it (Kotler and Keller, 2013). The value an enterprise provides its customers with then has a strong impact on any other
behaviour of all segments of the entire value chain. It means to start applying differentiated value network marketing (Kumar, 2008), which is built on the basis of network value management from manufacturers to the final consumers.

The customer value is dealt with by a number of authors (Woodruff and Gardial, 1996; Khalifa 2004). In the current concept, it is seen as an integrated configuration creating a comprehensive model of the customer value (Sudarsanam, 2003; Khalifa, 2004; Kowalkowski, 2011). The concept that wins recognition is the multidimensional concept of the customer value, which makes it easier to identify how the customer uses the benefits of the offered products and services in the real life (Lostakova et al., 2009; Kourdi, J., 2011). The form and design of the products and services should also reflect the overall customers’ experience creating or enhancing their customer value. The things that are more and more important are the intangible emotional and social attributes of the customer value, which are difficult to copy by the competitors and thus they constitute the assets leading to deepening the customer relations and to an increase in their loyalty (Woodruff and Flint, 2006; Baron and Harris, 2010; Wei-Lun Chang and Yu-Ting Hong, 2011; Wallenburg and Lukassen, 2011). Permanent innovation of these intangible dimensions of the customer value improves the clients’ attitudes to online shopping and influences their e-shopping behaviour (Wiedmann et al., 2010). The intangible dimensions of the customer value have been defined by Sheth et al. (1991) as social, emotional, epistemic, and situational ones. These have been further developed as experiential-hedonistic, symbolic-expressive dimensions of the customer benefits and the benefits relating to sacrificing a customer (Smith and Colgate, 2007). They refer to transfer of know-how, enhancement of core competencies, strategic position development, new products/services (Spiteri et al., 2004; Tetrevo, 2012).

Only a comprehensive concept of satisfying the customers’ needs and offering original, innovative solutions to their problems can lead to establishment of long-term customer relations and to an increase in their loyalty (Woodruff and Gardial, 1996; Khalifa, 2004; Kourdi, J., 2011). This means that it is essential, within the process of strengthening the emotional and social components of the customer value, to cooperate with the value network entities more closely, and thus create together so-called strategic benefits, which bring a significant long-term growth in the customer value (Lostakova, 2010).

2.2. The Forms of the Retention Support Tools in E-commerce

The growing intensity of the competitive environment in the e-commerce requires not only that the e-shops improve the user-friendliness of their web pages, but also that they provide their customers with a wide range of services and develop a mutually beneficial dialogue (Gurau, 2005). A higher value given to the customers compared with the competitors leads to the customer loyalty, which results in increased business profits. This way, the profits are connected with the value created for the customers (Gefen, 2002; Lostakova et al., 2009). The classic tools for making the customer purchase are different forms of transactional sales support, which however gradually lose their effectiveness (Prikylova and Jahodova, 2010). That is why various forms of rewards programs and loyalty programs have been introduced in parallel with them (see e.g. Tuzovic, 2010; Wei-Ming Ou et al., 2011). All these forms can also be used within creation of the e-shop offers, but the question is how the e-shop clients perceive their importance as a tool encouraging them to buy repeatedly.

The problems of strengthening customer relations on the web and their forms that actually strengthen these relations do not enjoy adequate attention in the current professional literature. In particular, it omits the question of the effect of individual marketing communication tools or forms on the development of
customer relations (Curdova, 2012). The idea that the customer loyalty is mainly based on low prices (nowadays they are rather a necessary condition), sales and other potential incentives of the material character is wrong (Toman, 2007). The values that we generally consider as important, both knowingly and subconsciously, are specified and put in order of importance people attach to them in the Maslow’s hierarchy. It ranks the physiologic needs to the lowest level of importance. The customer loyalty is based on fulfillment of the general human needs, particularly the recognition and self-fulfilment. The basic prerequisite for building and strengthening customer relations is the ease of their access to the internet and the attractiveness of marketing communication and customer services. The important factors affecting relations between an e-shop and its customers and the process of strengthening links with its customers include creation of feedbacks, usability and elements supporting credibility of the web pages, individual components of direct marketing (e.g. e-mail, SMS marketing), internet advertising and its forms, sales support, public relations, loyalty programs, telephone counselling or online counselling (Curdova, 2012).

The perception of the tools instigating a repeated purchase and strengthening the e-pharmacy customer relations must be thoroughly analysed in mutual relations. Some forms of retention support can be closely related, and so they might be perceived by the customers equally or considered simultaneously. The reaction of individual customers to this support can then be caused by parallel effects of latent factors instigating a repeated purchase in a different way.

**H1:** The perception of the importance of the retention support tools can be explained by the common effects of latent factors instigating a repeated purchase from the e-pharmacy.

The diverse perception of the importance of the retention support tools by individual e-pharmacy customers can lead to their purposeful segmentation. On the basis of identification of the customer profiles in the respective segments, it is possible to use a differentiated approach to building the customer loyalty and strengthening the customer relations through, for example, directed e-mails, building loyalty programs, differentiated on-line counselling, etc.

**H2:** The e-pharmacy customers can be purposefully segmented on the basis of the perceived importance of the retention tools used by e-shops.

### 3. Methodology and Results

#### 3.1. Research Goal and Data Collection

In this survey we aim to analyse the importance of the retention support tools and identify the e-commerce customer segments in which the importance of these tools is perceived diversely. To meet the set targets and to approve the working hypotheses, the research team designed and implemented a quantitative survey among the clients of a selected e-pharmacy in the Czech Republic.

The quantitative survey on which this paper is based was conducted among the clients of the e-pharmacy of LekarnaURotundy.cz. The research mainly aimed to identify the clients’ attitudes to the retention support tools, but also the way of choosing an e-pharmacy and the specifics of the e-pharmacy shopping behaviour. The research was performed using the method of an internet survey involving the clients of the chosen e-pharmacy. The research team addressed 1200 customers of the e-pharmacy who purchased from the e-shop more than once within the monitored period in 2012. 761 out of 1200 addressed clients filled in the online questionnaire. The total rate of willingness to participate in the survey reached 64%. The acquired data were analysed through the IBM SPSS Statistics program and two proposed relations were tested through factor and cluster analyses.
3.2. Analyses and Results

In the first part of the survey, the respondents evaluated the importance of nine retention support tools, which are used in e-commerce most frequently. They were particularly the loyalty programs within which the customers get a discount or a gift if they manage to collect a certain number of points/credits from their previous purchases (a, b), or where a discount is bound to a certain volume of purchases (c, d), or where a discount is bound to buying some goods in the previous period (e). The other researched tools included contests (f) and surveys (g) encouraging the customers to buy repeatedly through winning prizes or another similar added value for their participation. The last group of tools was comprised of the pharmacy and product references by the other clients (h) and the e-shop product information obtained from the pharmacy’s online counselling (i). The perceived importance of the tools was evaluated on a five-point scale (1 = unimportant, 5 = important). For the comparison of the perceived importance of individual tools, see Figure 1.

![Comparison of Median Perceived Importance of Retention Support Tools](image)

**Fig. 1.** Comparison of the median of the perceived importance of retention support tools by all respondents

It is possible to consider an instant discount in the case of a given volume of purchase (c) and the clients’ references (h), which were evaluated by the customers as rather important, as the most important retention support tools. This shows the e-shop customers’ high sensitivity to prices, and also a high rate of confidence in the information provided by the other e-shop customers in the form of references. Contests (f) and surveys (g) can be considered as rather unimportant tools, which have statistically less important influence on repeated purchases than the other retention support tools. In view of a high correlation between some pairs of tools, we performed a factor analysis of the perceived importance of the retention support tools to identify the factors that lead to repeated purchases in e-shops and might thus contribute to building the customer loyalty. The factor analysis outcomes are shown in Table 1.

The factor analysis outcomes proved the existence of four factors encouraging the e-shop customers to buy repeatedly. Therefore, the retention support tools can be definitely divided into four groups, where it is not the form of the loyalty program (i.e. the way of obtaining an added value to the purchase) what is decisive, but the sort of the added value the customer gets by buying repeatedly from the e-shop. They are Discounts (factor 1), Prizes (factor 2), Information (factor 3), and Gifts (factor 4). By the common effects of the identified factors, whose importance can be perceived by the customers quite differently, the customers are encouraged to buy from the e-shop repeatedly. The performed analysis leads to acceptance of working hypothesis \( H1: \text{The perception of the importance of the retention support tools can be explained by the common effects of latent factors instigating a repeated purchase from the e-pharmacy.} \)
The performed analysis of the perceived importance of retention support tools did not prove any significant differences in most analysed tools. However, it is possible to presume that the selected sample of respondents consists of different customer segments, which are encouraged to buy repeatedly using different methods. Therefore, the e-shop customers were segmented by perceived importance of the factors. In view of the high number of respondents, the segmentation was performed on the basis of the statistical tool of Two Step Cluster Analysis, available in IBM SPSS Statistics software. The four factors identified by the factor analysis were chosen as the segmentation variables, the optimal number of clusters was determined using the Schwarz's Bayesian Criterion (BIC). On the basis of BIC optimization, the software assessed the optimal number of clusters corresponding to five customer segments with the quantity representation of the respondents, shown in Figure 2.

![Fig. 2. Frequencies of customers in identified segments](image)

The position of centroids of individual clusters (see Table 2) implies different effects of the analysed factors on the encouragement of repeated purchases from the e-shop. While the factor of Prizes has a definite effect compared to the other factors in the only group of customers (Cluster 1), the other
customer segments are significantly affected by a combination of several factors. The important effect of the factor of Information manifests itself together with the factor of Gifts (Cluster 3) or with the factor of Discounts (Cluster 4). Similarly, there is a group of customers who are strongly affected by the factors of Gifts and Discounts (Cluster 5). The analysis also identified a segment of customers that was affected by all the monitored factors very little (Cluster 2). Apparently, they are the customers that do not consider the common retention support tools as an important reason for a repeated purchase from the e-shop.

Table 2. Position of centroids in identified segments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster ID</th>
<th>Discounts</th>
<th>Prizes</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Gifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information acquired through the cluster analysis corresponds to the perceived importance of the retention support tools in individual customer segments (see Table 3). Table 3 also implies that in almost all the segments the availability of information in the form of references and online counselling is considered as the most important and also in the case of the customer segment (Cluster 2) where the customers consider the commonly used loyalty programs as rather or totally unimportant. An exception can be seen in the customer segment (Cluster 5) where provision of discounts and gifts is definitely preferred to the information contained in the references and online counselling.

Table 3. Comparison of the median of the perceived importance of retention support tools in identified customer segments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention Support Tools</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A discount provided for a certain number of points (a)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose a gift for a certain number of points (b)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant discount in the case of a given volume of purchase (c)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately a gift in the case of a given volume of purchase (d)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A discount from the previous purchase (e)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contests (f)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys (g)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References (h)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online counselling (i)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, there is still a question to what extent it is possible to specify profiles of individual segments in the way it makes sense to have differentiated effects on them to encourage the customers to buy from the e-shop repeatedly and thus to contribute to building long-term customer relations. A differentiated use of retention support tools could also increase the effectiveness and decrease the costs of the used loyalty programs. For this reason, the second part of the research was dedicated to analysis of the answers to
another more than 30 open and closed questions concerning particularly the customers’ shopping behaviour in the e-pharmacy, the choice of the e-pharmacy, the perception of the incentives to buy from the e-pharmacy repeatedly and the demographic respondent data. On the basis of the results of t-tests in cross tables, which aimed to reveal significance differences in the answers given by customers from different segments, we compiled the segment profiles as shown in Table 4 (the differences were tested at a significance level of 0.05).

Table 4. Segment profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of issues</th>
<th>Cluster 1</th>
<th>Cluster 2</th>
<th>Cluster 3</th>
<th>Cluster 4</th>
<th>Cluster 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shopping behaviour and reasons for purchasing from e-pharmacy</strong></td>
<td>I prefer e-pharmacy as I get more information on internet.</td>
<td>I don’t check the first links offered by the web browser.</td>
<td>I prefer e-pharmacy as I don’t obtain necessary advice or information in a brick-and-mortar pharmacy.</td>
<td>I don’t obtain more information on internet than in a brick-and-mortar pharmacy.</td>
<td>I check the first links offered by the web browser. With my purchase intent, I go directly to e-pharmacy web pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choice of e-pharmacy</strong></td>
<td>I’m not indifferent to the fact which e-pharmacy I shop in.</td>
<td>I don’t care which e-pharmacy I shop in, it is essential for me how quick the product delivery is and the method of payment.</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>I choose e-pharmacy on the basis of doctor’s/pharmacist’s recommendation.</td>
<td>I don’t care which e-pharmacy I shop in, it is essential for me how interesting the offer is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of incentives to buy from e-pharmacy repeatedly</strong></td>
<td>I make use of offers sent by e-mail, newsletter, etc.</td>
<td>I feel bothered by offers sent by email, newsletter, etc.</td>
<td>Beneficial: online counselling, particularly for obtaining more detailed information about drug effects and dosage.</td>
<td>Beneficial: special price offers.</td>
<td>Non-beneficial: online counselling, method of obtaining information (swiftness, comfort and security).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic data</strong></td>
<td>Primary and secondary education</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Up to 5 years old</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>University degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The biggest customer segment (Cluster 1, 30%) contains almost a third of the inquired respondents with rather a lower level of education. The customers from this segment can be characterized as loyal customers preferring e-pharmacy shopping mainly for the reason of their access to detailed information.
They respond to offers sent by e-mail, which could encourage them to buy something. They consider the information obtained through online counselling or in the form of references from the other clients as the most important retention support tools.

Another customer segment (Cluster 2, 19%) can be marked as a segment of distrustful customers, who show a low rate of loyalty to e-pharmacies. They are mostly men, 51 – 65 years old. They consider verbose product descriptions and extensive information in online counselling as useless and non-beneficial. Their distrustfulness shows mainly in their negative attitude to references and consultations concerning the buying intention in e-pharmacies. Their shopping behaviour is specific in the way of looking for a suitable product and place (e-shop) where to shop. They feel bothered with marketing communication on the internet and they do not think they are affected by these tools. The common retention support tools might be of a small effect in this segment.

The second biggest customer segment (Cluster 3, 21%) mainly includes young customers preferring e-shops to brick-and-mortar shops. The reason for this is online access to detailed product information on the e-pharmacy web pages, through online counselling, but also through references provided by the other e-pharmacy clients. As for the common retention support tools, they are most perceptive to gifts and discounts provided immediately in the case of reaching a given volume of purchase.

The smallest customer segment (Cluster 4, 15%) is represented by typical brick-and-mortar pharmacy customers, who do the shopping in e-pharmacies for the purpose of taking advantage of special offers. Therefore, it is possible to apply effectively mainly such forms of retention support tools that are based on provision of discounts. For them, the important tools include an immediately obtained discount and other types of discounts that are bound to previous purchases (loyalty programs). They also consider existence of online counselling on the e-pharmacy’s web pages and access to the other clients’ references as very important.

The second smallest customer segment (Cluster 5, 16%) mainly includes customers with a university degree, who do not spend a lot of time doing the shopping on the internet (as a matter of priority, they use the links offered by internet browsers, they do not waste much time comparing offers, and they do not consider online counselling, references, or any other forms of obtaining product information from the internet as beneficial). They usually choose the e-pharmacy on the basis of the fact how an offer that attracts their attention is interesting. As for the common retention support tools, they are particularly perceptive to discounts provided immediately or within a loyalty program.

The performed study shows that the market of e-pharmacy customers is not homogeneous from the point of view of perception of the importance of retention support tools. It is purposeful to segment it and take a differentiated approach to partial segments when encouraging customers to buy repeatedly and to building the customer loyalty. This means that the outcomes of the performed analysis confirm working hypothesis H2: The e-pharmacy customers can be purposefully segmented on the basis of the perceived importance of the retention tools used by e-shops.

4. Conclusion

In the present highly competitive environment, businesses are forced to change their approaches to entrepreneurial activities. This requires changes in the ways of servicing markets and creation of a value for customers and building long-term relationships with customers. The basic prerequisite for building and strengthening customer relations is the ease of their access to the internet and the attractiveness of marketing communication and customer services. The important factors affecting relations between an e-shop and its customers and the process of strengthening links with its customers include creation of
feedbacks, usability and elements supporting credibility of the web pages, individual components of
direct marketing (e.g. e-mail, SMS marketing), internet advertising and its forms, sales support, public
relations, loyalty programs, telephone counselling or online counselling.

A common way of building long-term online customer relations is application of loyalty programs and
the other website retention support tools, which are based on repeated visits or purchases. The performed
study, which aimed to analyse perception of the importance of retention support tools, showed that the
process of encouraging e-pharmacy customers to buy repeatedly involves four factors. The identified
factors correspond, from the point of view of the contents, to the type of added value the customer
receives on the basis of a repeated purchase from the e-shop (discounts, prizes, information and gifts). As
for the e-pharmacy customers, the factor that has proved most successful is the factor of information
obtained through references provided by the other clients or through online counselling. This is
apparently related to the fact that these tools represent, for most current online customers, an important
component of the value compared to purchases at brick-and-mortar shops. On the other hand, the least
important factor encouraging repeated purchases from an e-pharmacy can be seen in the possibility of
being involved in loyalty programs having the form of a survey or competition. Nevertheless, they are
very frequently used tools of communication with the customers on these markets.

On the basis of application of the above factors in the shopping process, the e-pharmacy customer
market was divided into five segments and their profiles were compiled. As for the commonly used
retention support tools, the customers are most perceptive to online counselling and to references
provided by the other customers, but it is also very well possible to encourage the customers to buy
repeatedly through provision of immediate price reduction upon a certain volume of purchase. However,
the e-commerce customer market is not homogeneous, and so it is suitable to use retention support tools
in differentiated way. This can finally result in an increase in the effectiveness of building long-term
customer relations.

The outcomes of the performed analyses confirmed both working hypothesis H1 (the perception of the
importance of the retention support tools can be explained by the common effects of latent factors
instigating a repeated purchase from the e-pharmacy) and hypothesis H2 (the e-pharmacy customers can
be purposefully segmented on the basis of the perceived importance of the retention tools used by e-
shops). Certain limitation of the above conclusions can be seen in the fact that the research was performed
among the customers of a single e-pharmacy. Nevertheless, we believe that they can be applied with
advantages within the process of creation of a marketing strategy in any company whose target markets
include e-pharmacy customers in the Czech Republic. The thing is that it is possible to expect that the
clients of the selected e-pharmacy are not specific in the monitored parameters compared with the other
customers on this market.

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