
Revolutionizing Healthcare: The Crucial Impact of Relational Marketing Strategies

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Abstract:

Purpose: This article focuses on non-medical benefits for the patient, which may influence their choices. The authors intend to identify the directions and actions of the healthcare entity, ensuring improvement of the quality of services provided and, as a result, increased patient satisfaction and loyalty. The analyses aim to understand how patients make decisions regarding the choice of a medical facility and what their priorities and expectations are concerning the organization of work, communication and image of the medical centre.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Authors apply methods of multivariate statistical analysis - the Mann-Whitney test was used to verify the significance of differences in respondents' evaluations. The following research hypotheses are formulated: (H1) recommendations positively impact the satisfaction related mainly to the organisation of the clinic's activity and providing necessary information (availability of services, waiting times, registration, website); (H2) satisfaction with the treatment process is primarily related to positive experiences. Calculations were made in Statistica.

Findings: The main conclusion of the research is the assumption that an effective marketing approach in health services should include a systematic study of patients' needs and expectations, the identification of latent preferences and the offering of new services in line with the expectations of potential as well as existing health consumers.

Originality/Value: The results suggest that the elements related to the treatment process are more important than on the opinions of other people in this area.

Keywords: Healthcare marketing, relational marketing, medical services, medical industry

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1. Introduction

The market worldwide is constantly changing – including the medical services market. Healthcare entities, like other enterprises, operate in the conditions of a market economy and must coexist and achieve a competitive advantage. Therefore, they should be managed as enterprises, bearing in mind the achievement of not only economic but, above all, social goals, considering the satisfaction of health needs as a priority.

Healthcare providers, facing growing competition, are increasingly willing to use professional marketing and management tools. Knowledge of the specifics of modern management becomes the basis for building a leading position in the competitive health services market.

Focusing on only one course of action is insufficient to achieve greater efficiency. It becomes necessary to apply various possible solutions. One of them may be the skilful use of marketing tools. “Healthcare marketing” can become a differentiator for a given clinic, translating into increased interest from patients in the long run.

It is also worth noting that the skilful application of marketing in healthcare organisations not only allows effective communication with patients and building bonds with them, but also allows the building (if only through the use of holistic marketing) of special relationships with external stakeholders of healthcare facilities.

It is not only about patients, but also about the broader stakeholders of external healthcare providers, such as suppliers, companies outsourcing to a given facility, regulators responsible for creating, implementing and controlling regulations applied to healthcare, or insurance companies.

The paper discusses the possibility of using relationship marketing in healthcare providers in Poland. Relationship marketing, described in the mid-1950s in E.D. McGary’s publications, points out the importance of relationships in maintaining satisfactory relationships with customers. In the 1970s, J. Arndt noticed changes in institutional markets resulting from the intensification of direct relations between employees and customers (Brandys and Kowalska-Musiał, 2014; Chrzęścik, 2012; Frankowska, 2009; Cristea and Thalassinou, 2016).

2. Healthcare Marketing

The health services market is constantly changing, and it is becoming more and more challenging to attract regular, loyal patients who will use the services of only one clinic on a long-term basis. For this reason, you can't rely on a once-developed scheme of marketing activities and expect success.

It becomes necessary to regularly observe the market, benchmark the competition, systematically survey patient satisfaction, and take action to “stay ahead of the trends” (Gonzalez, 2019). Marketing is about predicting, stimulating, recognising and meeting requirements.

The provision of health services can become an element of marketing, remembering, however, that the primary goal of every clinic is to take care of the patient, to be called to help the sick and those in need. The patient and their health should always be the centre of attention (Yıldırım *et al.*, 2022). It makes medical facilities different from other companies – they expect more than profit, and the treatment effect becomes essential here.

There is a concept of “healthcare marketing” in the world (Online Healthcare MBA,..., 2023). The term refers to the process of creating and communicating healthcare information. Due to its specificity, the marketing of health services belongs to interdisciplinary fields since it uses specific methods and techniques characteristic of classical and social marketing (Purcarea, 2019). He draws his expertise from many areas, such as healthcare analysis, health promotion, communication, marketing and, most importantly – patient care. The effectiveness of marketing in health care will be based on the image of a healthy population and ensuring the correct treatment process for sick people.

Healthcare marketing cares about providing value to its target market, patients (Health-care Marketing Objectives,..., 2023). Its goal will be to take care of the patient, build lasting relationships with him, and, above all, create high satisfaction (Intrepy Healthcare Marketing,..., 2023). All this will be aimed at attracting patients to the medical facility through posted messages and offers (Hirsch Healthcare Consulting,..., 2023).

Remember that the most reliable information comes from patient recommendations, and their positive opinions should be constantly sought. The quality of the patient experience in a given clinic directly affects the medical facility's reputation, thanks to the references left by the patient.

Using “healthcare marketing” in a clinic can bring long-term benefits. It will primarily relate to improving the patient experience, enabling patients to make more informed, wise decisions, which in the future will translate into an increase in the consumer base of health services, thanks to the improvement of the quality of

services, increasing their loyalty, and in the long run, will bring more revenue (Healthcare Success...2023). Adequately designed marketing tactics can help you reach new patients, retain existing ones, and regain lost ones OpusVi Healthcare Workforce Development,...., 2023).

3. Marketing Activities in the Medical Industry

Nowadays, the activity of healthcare entities is based mainly – apart from the effects of treatment – on the quality of the services provided. To achieve success, a healthcare entity should use modern solutions that will help it gain an advantage in the competitive market. In times of increased competition, the quality of services provided and the approach to the patient play a key role.

However, to attract patients to a given medical facility or inform them about the services offered, you need to do something more – skillfully use marketing tools. Therefore, the question arises regarding advertising a healthcare entity without violating the applicable law.

According to the legal maxim “Ignorantia iuris nocet”, no one can explain the fact of breaking the law by ignorance. Polish law prohibits advertising of medical practices, which is regulated, among others, in Article 63 of the Code of Medical Ethics (NIL,...., 2023).

According to this article, “a physician shall not consent to the use of his or her name and image for commercial purposes” and “a physician shall form his or her professional opinion solely based on the results of his or her work, and therefore any advertising is prohibited”.

Therefore, a doctor may not appear in an advertisement or take any action to promote his business activity to encourage potential patients to use his services. A doctor is subject to professional liability for such misconduct (usually in the form of a warning, reprimand or acceptable, following the provisions of the Act on Medical Chambers - Article 83(1) (Centrum Medyczne KRAJMED,...., 2023).

The situation is similar concerning healthcare entities. Due to strict legal regulations, healthcare entities in Poland are also not allowed to advertise traditionally. Of course, they can use modern marketing tools, but they must be conscientious when planning such solutions. The healthcare sector is limited by legal norms that determine the scope and form of advertising of services.

According to Article 14(1) of the Act of 15 April 2011 on Medical Activity (Wiedza Medyczna,...., 2023), “an entity performing medical activity shall make public information on the scope and types of health services provided”, but the content and form of such information may not have the characteristics of advertising (Wiedza Medyczna,...., 2023).

At the patient's request, the healthcare entity may provide detailed information on the health services offered in a given facility, the diagnostic and therapeutic methods used, and the quality and safety of these methods (Wiedza Medyczna, ..., 2023). So it can inform, but it can't advertise. In practice, however, it is difficult to determine what is an advertisement and what is not because it is not specified (MedExpress.pl, ..., 2023). According to the wording of the Act, healthcare entities may not directly persuade patients to use the services they provide.

However, they can conduct information and educational campaigns for patients, informing them about the advantages of disease prevention or health-promoting behaviours. They can also provide information about the methods and services in a given medical facility. Such activities are the basis of marketing health services, the main goal is to build a positive image of a medical facility or doctor and, thus, gain the patient's trust (Healthcare Success, ..., 2023).

Healthcare marketing is a strategic action and communication process with patients to attract consumers, guide them through healthcare, and ultimately maintain loyalty (WebMD Ignite, ..., 2023).

In the era of dynamic development of the medical services market and constantly growing needs and expectations of society, medical marketing is becoming an indispensable element of running an effectively functioning medical entity (Mehta, 2022). Of course, the highest quality of services is the basis, but without proper marketing activities, even the best clinic may be unable to cope with the ruthless competition (Marketing usług medycznych, ..., 2023). Marketing of health services is the right strategy for a healthcare entity. This process increases recognition and builds a positive image to attract patients to a medical facility (UniqueSEO, ..., 2023).

The necessity of "attaching the patient" to the clinic is also dictated by health care information system changes, which give the patient access to complete documentation outside a specific facility. From 1 July 2021, according to Article 56 of the Act on the Health Care Information System, every doctor, office and healthcare entity (providing medical services both under the NFZ contract and privately) is obliged to report medical events using special software (P1 Platform, i.e., "Electronic Platform for Collecting, Analysing and Sharing Digital Resources on Medical Events" (referred to as SIM) (Mediporta, ..., 2023).

A medical event occurs every time a patient comes into contact with a health centre, regardless of whether the patient is treated in a public or private centre that they have been attending for years or occasionally selected as a result of a fortuitous event.

The healthcare entity must register the patient and create an EDM, i.e., an electronic medical record, for them. EDM replaces paper medical records. It includes medical history, diagnoses, consultation descriptions, test results, referrals, prescriptions,

epicrisis, etc. Medical events are recorded in the e-health system, and each patient can access the IKP account or the IKP application (Online Patient Account). It is where you can find all the patient's documentation, which the doctor can also access.

The primary goal of reporting medical events is the patient's well-being, thanks to which the exchange of information about the patient's health condition is provided on an ongoing basis, and the patient can be treated comprehensively in centres of his choice.

From the point of view of a medical registrar, EDM streamlines the registration process and improves the circulation of documents, including the privacy and confidentiality of patient data (ezdrowie.gov.pl,...,2023). It is also about coordinating the treatment process and improving the quality, completeness and legibility of medical documentation.

On the one hand, the IT system reduces the time spent on, e.g. completing and searching for patient records; on the other hand, it imposes new duties on registrars. After introducing electronic medical records, the patient has a safer opportunity – without losing information about their health condition – to change the health centre. As a result of a positive relationship between the patient and the medical staff, the patient returns to the health centre.

4. Relationship Marketing in Medical Services

The specificity of medical services is closely related to risk and the lack of guarantee of success. For this reason, medical staff play a significant role and should create a positive and friendly image of a given health centre. It has a tremendous impact on forming a relationship with the patient. A positive relationship between the patient (their needs and expectations) and the medical staff determines the entire service process, its shape and patient satisfaction (Fiano *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, relationship marketing is vital in medical facilities because it puts interpersonal relationships first. Relationship marketing suggests developing a partnership between the parties (the patient and the service provider), built on cooperation and trust. In this system, the patient should be the centre of attention (Stępniewski, 2013). Great importance should be attached to the employed staff, whose personality, competence, and commitment depend on the quality of staff and the level of service.

Relationship marketing is gaining importance in medical services due to the emerging relationships between medical staff and patients, conditioning the formation of lasting bonds and dependencies (Brandys and Kowalska-Musiał, 2014; Czerw *et al.*, 2012; Dobska, 2020; Dobska, 2009; Kemp *et al.*, 2014; Nadziakiewicz, 2018). The shape of mutual relations should lead to a state consistent with the

patient's expectations and characterised by an increase in concern for the patient's well-being.

The importance of the interaction between the patient and the medical staff cannot be overestimated and requires the total commitment of both parties. The patient-service provider relationship should be based primarily on trust, security, and confidence in the treatment process (Czerw, 2012).

The lack of these components excludes the patient's active role in the service process. It simultaneously limits their ability to co-create the value of the relationship (Rudawska, 2004). A provider's involvement enhances their ability to enrich the value offered to the customer.

The value should be understood as both the achievement of goals related to the treatment process itself and the value perceived by the patient, which will be the result of the attributes possessed by the service provider and created by him in contacts with patients (Sreejesh *et al.*, 2022).

In particular, it will be responsibility, empathy, unique competencies and availability. The quality of service will always be the result of the behaviour of the staff in a given specific situation. The patient makes such an assessment by entering into a conscious relationship with the medical staff during the service delivery.

Competition in the healthcare sector triggers the need to achieve success, which is why medical facilities should primarily cultivate relationships with their patients, as patients are the determinants of a well-functioning medical entity. Without patients, the activity of a healthcare entity is not possible.

In relationship marketing, this refers to the mutual satisfaction of the parties to the exchange. In this relationship, the patient and the provider benefit from the established contact. The benefit for the patient will primarily be a positive outcome of the treatment, fulfilling their health needs, and for the healthcare entity – the provision of health services and profit.

Creating bonds with the patient that maintain mutual relationships for relationship marketing is also essential. A good relationship between a healthcare entity and a patient usually leads to patient satisfaction, which can translate into loyalty to a given health centre (Yıldırım *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, satisfied patients become a living advertisement and, over time, healthcare entity advocates actively promote it through the so-called "word of mouth" or word of mouth (Kemp *et al.*, 2014). Healthcare entities should pay attention to the patient's first impression, which affects the patient's perception of the institution's image. The first contact with a health centre is vital, especially how the patient is admitted by the first contact person – e.g., a medical registrar.

What is more, health-related factors such as the way the medical staff receives the patient, the attitude of the healthcare provider, the waiting time for an appointment, competence and expertise, and the hospital environment are essential and affect the formation of long-term relationships between patients and healthcare providers (Adomah-Afari *et al.*, 2019; Adomah-Afari *et al.*, 2018). A medical registrar meets a patient in the first place, and the service efficiency often determines what kind of business card a medical facility will issue.

The most important duties and most frequently performed tasks in the position of a medical registrar include providing comprehensive and reliable information on the principles of operation of the facility and the medical services it offers, as well as taking care of building trust and security related to the confidentiality of the information and the protection of personal and medical data. Building a long-term relationship with the patient is one of the most essential principles a clinic should follow in its operations.

The right approach towards patients distinguishes a given medical facility from the competition. Implementing relationship marketing principles in a healthcare entity's practice can bring long-term benefits.

These assumptions include customer/patient retention, service quality, emphasis on acquisition, retention and development of the client/patient, long-term cooperation, individualisation of relationships and partnership. Maintaining good relations between the medical staff and the patient is conducive to better patient understanding and individual approach, leads to loyalty and can be a source of greater profits (Frankowska, 2009).

Customers are an indispensable link in any business process. They are the main driver of the organisation's functioning and a factor determining its success. They play a crucial role in organisations that want to make a name for themselves in the market and are becoming an increasingly sought-after asset.

Each healthcare entity is linked to the environment in which it operates. For this reason, the providers must be particularly open to clients' opinions and shape contacts with them, ensuring that their needs and expectations are met. It does not have to be only a process of constant adaptation to the influences of the environment but a permanent process of exchanging messages and information, thanks to which it will form the right bonds with customers.

To succeed in the health services market, a healthcare organisation must consider patients' needs and strive to satisfy them. Caring for consumer satisfaction in this service sector is now a standard of conduct and one of the most critical factors determining the competitiveness of a medical facility.

It affects the fulfilment of the needs and expectations of health service customers, contributes to increasing the level of patient service in the clinic, and thus increases patient satisfaction, which can turn into patient loyalty and positively impact the image of a given clinic. The external client (the patient, family, and friends) is essential in healthcare entities. The clinic can achieve success by understanding their requirements and meeting their expectations.

A patient of the clinic cannot be treated as a petitioner. It is a particular customer of health services, which should be considered the most essential part of the organisation's structure and to which the healthcare entity should subordinate all its activities. Without patients, the clinic would not exist. Patients are the most critical people in any medical entity. They are the goal of the work, so they deserve full attention and courtesy. They also have rights that the healthcare provider must strictly respect.

Every healthcare entity should provide its patients with comprehensive medical services by providing patients with reliable and comprehensive health services while maintaining high medical standards. A healthcare entity should put the patient first, and when using its services, the patient should be treated professionally from the very first contact with the healthcare entity (Rudawska, 2004). Starting from registration, obtaining information, medical advice, and service by a nurse in the treatment room.

Employees of the registration of healthcare entities should remember that competent staff can significantly improve the image of a given facility in the eyes of the patient. Medical staff are considered essential resources of the organisation, and since the patient service process is closely related to the frontline worker, the customer's first impression of him, his competence, and his ability to provide efficient service will affect the evaluation of the clinic (Bugdol, 2012).

As a rule, patients cannot clearly define their expectations in this area, but they are excellent at identifying any deficiencies that affect their opinion of the entire health centre. Employees' visible lack of competence may result in a lower tolerance of possible shortcomings in the patient – both now and in the future.

Every organisation operating in the market, including those providing health services, should look for the source of success in its customers. Customers are an indispensable link in every business process. They become the main driver of the organisation's functioning and a factor guaranteeing business success. In the case of medical services, the overriding value for patients is health, as well as the effectiveness and safety of the treatment process.

Their subjective opinions about a given clinic are often based on the effect of the treatment process. Therefore, each healthcare entity should consider its clients'

interests and try to understand their needs and expectations, as this will allow it to succeed and gain an advantage over the competition.

Patients are a group of people with specific requirements and expectations. A patient is any person who uses the clinic's services, regardless of their health condition. A patient should not be treated as a "petitioner" because they are a unique customer of health services, without whom a healthcare entity would not exist. It should be remembered that human health and life are at stake in health services. Therefore, every patient should be treated professionally from the first contact with a health centre (Alkhateeb and Do, 2013).

Nowadays, patients are becoming excellent "carriers of information" about the functioning of healthcare entities. They are an integral part of the healthcare process and shape the health services market by expressing opinions defining their preferences and expectations towards a given healthcare provider. Healthcare entities must care for their customers and consider their interests in their activities. The growing competition in the health services market forces them to do so. Clinics rely mainly on their image as well as the trust of patients.

Patient opinion surveys have become an excellent method of obtaining information on patient satisfaction with health services to improve the health centre's image.

5. Methods and Data

This article focuses on the non-medical benefits that may affect the patient's choices as a healthcare provider. The authors intend to define the directions and methods of operation of a medical entity, ensuring the improvement of the quality of patient service. The presented analyses are aimed at verifying the perception of service in the clinic by registrars, doctors and nurses.

The study involved 607 respondents - patients currently using outpatient health care services in Częstochowa. We assume that patients become "living advertisements", spokespersons of the medical entity, actively promoting it through the so-called "word of mouth", which makes it possible to assess the quality of outpatient health care depending on the choice of clinic based on the opinions of friends who had previously used the advice of the clinic.

The questionnaire evaluated the service provided by registrars, physicians and nurses. Respondents assessed the selected characteristics of the clinic's activity using the Likert scale (1 to 5). The following research hypotheses were formulated:

(H1) recommendations positively impact the satisfaction related mainly to the organisation of the clinic's activity and providing necessary information (availability of services, waiting times, registration, website);

(H2) satisfaction with the treatment process is primarily related to positive experiences.

Statistical methods were used to verify the hypotheses. We employ the U-Man Whitney test to analyse the differences between selected groups of respondents. Calculations were made using Statistica.

6. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of axiomatic determinants of the patient in the service relationship in the clinic.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of axiomatic determinants of the patient in the service relationship in the outpatient clinic

	Average	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Professionalism/competence (reliable, accurate information provided to the patient)	4.1380	0.8776	-0.9030	0.4738
Commitment and readiness to help with the matter	3.9730	0.9168	-0.7252	0.2125
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	4.2286	0.8576	-1.1319	1.2718
External appearance of the attendant (clothing, aesthetics)	4.3798	0.7958	-1.3516	1.8388
Individual approach to the patient/client	3.9899	0.9515	-0.8298	0.3631
Time and quality of service/handling of the case	3.9394	1.0157	-0.8955	0.4383
Convenience of the location of the clinic	4.0117	0.9393	-0.6950	-0.0822
Availability of parking for clients/patients of the clinic	3.2809	1.1871	-0.2640	-0.8177
Clinic working hours	4.1347	0.9375	-1.0966	0.9157
Housing conditions (cleanliness and aesthetics)	4.1040	0.8437	-0.6875	-0.1597
Social conditions (toilets)	3.9538	0.9064	-0.5735	-0.2546
Adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities	3.6787	1.1155	-0.4540	-0.6791
Availability of specialist doctors/admission limits	3.4604	1.1370	-0.4242	-0.5847
Waiting time for specialists/treatments/examinations	3.2142	1.2626	-0.3378	-0.9221
Accurate and accessible information	4.0371	0.8940	-0.7559	0.2256
Appropriate signage/information	4.0135	0.8593	-0.6658	0.0431

boards				
Readability/accessibility of the clinic's website	3.6111	1.1443	-0.5192	-0.5656
Possibility to settle the matter by phone/online	3.5068	1.1280	-0.5261	-0.4542
Professionalism and expertise	4.2508	0.8127	-0.7727	-0.2628
Commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem	4.0186	0.8830	-0.5985	-0.1864
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	4.3104	0.7987	-0.9938	0.3758
Doctor's individual approach to the patient	4.0790	0.8907	-0.6572	-0.2159
Adherence to the principles of medical ethics	4.3630	0.7583	-1.1562	1.4741

Source: Elaboration based on the author's questionnaire.

The analysis of the data presented in Table 1 shows that the worst-rated elements are those related to the health system rather than the work of the clinic (waiting time for specialists/treatments/examinations 3,21, availability of specialist doctors/admission limits 3,28) and housing and transport constraints (availability of parking for clients/patients of the clinic 3,28, adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities 3,67).

The highest rated factors are those related to the general quality standards of the clinic's staff: External appearance of the attendant (clothing, aesthetics 4.38, adherence to the principles of medical ethics 4.36, good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient) 4.31, professionalism and expertise 4.25, doctor's good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient) 4.23, professionalism/competence (reliable, accurate information provided to the patient) 4.14).

However, some deficiencies are noted when assessing the time taken and solving health problems of a more severe nature. In this area, the average assessment is already lower than in the overall performance assessment but still above the average for all questions (doctor's individual approach to the patient 4.08, commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem 4.02, individual approach to the patient/client 3.99, commitment and readiness to help 3.97, time and quality of service/handling of the case 3.94).

Respondents rate the possibility of carrying out essential matters remotely relatively low (possibility to settle the matter by phone/online 3.51) as well as the functionality of the centre's website (readability/accessibility of the clinic's website 3.61);

however, access to information is still highly rated (accurate and accessible information 4.04).

Table 2. Results of U-Mann-Whitney. The assessment of the quality of service depending on the source of opinion on location and distance from home

Variable	Based on the opinions of friends / based on your own opinion about the modernity of the building and the distance from the house	
	Measure	
	Z	p
Professionalism/competence (reliable, accurate information provided to the patient)	-0.64126	0.521354
Commitment and readiness to help with the matter	1.14021	0.254201
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	0.47753	0.632984
External appearance of the attendant (clothing, aesthetics)	-0.32915	0.742042
Individual approach to the patient/client	1.97324	0.048469
Time and quality of service/handling of the case	1.18187	0.237258
Convenience of the location of the clinic	-1.87308	0.061059
Availability of parking for clients/patients of the clinic	1.38671	0.165530
Clinic working hours	-0.52003	0.603040
Housing conditions (cleanliness and aesthetics)	1.79396	0.072821
Social conditions (toilets)	1.45213	0.146466
Adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities	0.47343	0.635907
Availability of specialist doctors/admission limits	2.50133	0.012373
Waiting time for specialists/treatments/examinations	3.94112	0.000081
Accurate and accessible information	0.42357	0.671878
Appropriate signage/information boards	2.19793	0.027955
Readability/accessibility of the clinic's website	2.19420	0.028221
Possibility to settle the matter by phone/online	2.91064	0.003607
Professionalism and expertise	0.75545	0.449981
Commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem	1.27814	0.201201
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	0.86684	0.386029
Doctor's individual approach to the patient	2.14051	0.032314
Adherence to the principles of medical ethics	0.47466	0.635027

Source: Elaboration based on the author's questionnaire.

The technical condition of the clinic was assessed at a relatively high level (housing conditions (cleanliness and aesthetics) 4.10, (Social conditions (toilets) 3.95), access for people with disabilities (adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities 3.68). It should be noted that in the case of the criteria with the highest scores, the diversity of responses is relatively low. In contrast, the variability is significantly higher in the case of relatively low-rated questions. The average standard deviation of the answers for the five highest-rated questions is 0.8658, while for the lowest-rated five questions, it is 1.1718.

The main part of the study is to examine the impact of word-of-mouth marketing on patient satisfaction. In the first stage, the relationship between the source of information about the clinic and patient satisfaction was analysed. The results presented in Table 2 show that if the information about the location (distance from home) and modernity of the clinic comes from family or friends, it has a positive effect on satisfaction related to characteristics such as:

- individual approach to the patient/client ($Z = 1.973$; $p = 0.048$),
- availability of specialist doctors/admission limits ($Z = 2.5013$; $p = 0.012$),
- waiting time for specialists/treatments/examinations ($Z = 3.941$; $p = 0.000$),
- appropriate signage/information boards ($Z = 2.198$; $p = 0.028$),
- readability/accessibility of the clinic’s website ($Z = 2.19420$; $p = 0.028$),
- possibility to settle the matter by phone/online ($Z = 2.91064$; $p = 0.004$).

Table 3. Results of U-Mann-Whitney. The assessment of the quality of service depending on the source of opinion on the quality of the service

Variable	Based on the opinions of your friends/based on your own opinion about the quality of the service	
	Measure	
	Z	p
Professionalism/competence (reliable, accurate information provided to the patient)	-1,04733	0,294950
Commitment and readiness to help with the matter	0,43978	0,660095
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	-1,28690	0,198131
External appearance of the attendant (clothing, aesthetics)	-1,58808	0,112269
Individual approach to the patient/client	-0,34364	0,731116
Time and quality of service/handling of the case	-1,41248	0,157811
Convenience of the location of the clinic	1,17251	0,240994
Availability of parking for clients/patients of the clinic	-0,71491	0,474662
Clinic working hours	-1,75822	0,078712

Housing conditions (cleanliness and aesthetics)	-1,01956	0,307937
Social conditions (toilets)	-1,58395	0,113207
Adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities	-3,82220	0,000132
Availability of specialist doctors/admission limits	-1,50089	0,133385
Waiting time for specialists/treatments/examinations	-0,94069	0,346864
Accurate and accessible information	0,19805	0,843003
Appropriate signage/information boards	0,66855	0,503786
Readability/accessibility of the clinic's website	-1,05467	0,291577
Possibility to settle the matter by phone/online	-0,83911	0,401409
Professionalism and expertise	-3,10418	0,001908
Commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem	-3,70158	0,000214
Good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient)	-3,02650	0,002474
Doctor's individual approach to the patient	-3,94049	0,000081
Adherence to the principles of medical ethics	-3,04057	0,002361

Source: Elaboration based on the author's questionnaire.

Therefore, information about the location and modernity of the clinic increases satisfaction related to the availability of information and services and a sense of individual patient treatment by doctors and other staff.

So, it can also be assumed that this is the information that patients seek when considering a visit to a new clinic. The facilitation of obtaining information (website, online or telephone registration) and the potential availability of the service may attract a potential new customer.

At the same time, the source of information on the location or modernity of the clinic does not affect the characteristics related to satisfaction with the treatment process, such as professionalism and expertise or commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem. In the case of assessing elements related to the treatment process itself, it is more important to rely on one's own experience of treatment than on the opinions of other people in this area.

Patients who choose a clinic based on their own opinion about the quality of services rated the following characteristics higher:

- professionalism and expertise ($Z = -3,10418$; $p = 0,001908$),
- commitment, accuracy, and curiosity in solving a health problem ($Z = -3,702$; $p = 0,000$),
- doctor's individual approach to the patient ($Z = -3,940$; $p = 0,000$),
- doctor's good manners (politeness, courtesy and friendly treatment of the patient, respect for the patient) ($Z = -3,027$; $p = 0,002$),

- adherence to the principles of medical ethics ($Z = - 3,040$; $p = 0,002$),
- adaptation of the clinic to the needs of people with disabilities ($Z = - 3,822$; $p = 0,002$).

The above differences may be due to the wide variation in medical needs and patients' experiences in the treatment process. It results in personal experience being placed above the experiences of others. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is essential for customer retention and loyalty.

Similar studies were conducted among patients in Germany (Achstetter *et al.*, 2022) The results show which elements classified as non-medical benefits for the patient should be improved in medical clinics to improve patient satisfaction, strengthen relationships and take care of the excellent reputation and image of the healthcare entity (Rudawska, 2004).

Putting in the first place taking care of the proper treatment process, good test results, and the health and life of patients, medical entities should also take care of non-medical benefits and constantly improve the relationship between the patient-medical registrar-doctor-nurse (Gupta *et al.*, 2011).

7. Conclusions

The healthcare sector is changing rapidly. What was once a quantity-based industry – centred around the physician is now evolving into a quality-based industry – centred around the patient (Levo Health,..., 2023). This is particularly true for primary and outpatient specialist care, which often operate within the private sector and, to a greater extent, under competitive pressure (Gupta *et al.*, 2011).

The main goal of health service marketing is to make patients aware and present them with services that can benefit them. Thanks to this, patients can choose a medical facility that offers them exactly what they expect. In addition to the medical benefits assessed based on treatment effects, the non-medical benefits for the patient should always be considered, which have become the subject of the presented studies. Marketing of health services is therefore used to demonstrate the capabilities of a given healthcare entity to potential patients (Health-care Marketing Objectives,..., 2023).

Healthcare marketing, if properly implemented, can help a practice attract new patients, keep existing patients engaged, establish long-term relationships with them, increase their loyalty, generate more revenue, and ultimately gain an advantage in an increasingly competitive healthcare market. The research shows that information about the location and modernity of the clinic provided by family, acquaintances or friends increases patient satisfaction, but above all, in areas related to the availability of information and services.

From a marketing point of view, it can be a source of acquiring new customers. However, satisfaction with the treatment process is no longer related to other people's opinions but is based on personal experience. So, while word-of-mouth marketing can bring in new patients, customer retention and loyalty are more likely related to medical experiences. What can keep a patient in the clinic is a positive experience – so there is a need to implement marketing based on building relationships.

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