

RELATIONSHIP WITH CUSTOMERS: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON NETWORKING IN PHARMACIES BUSINESS

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Abstract. Building and strengthening long-term relationships with customers on the principle of mutual benefit is an effective strategy to manage businesses and their networks in today's highly competitive environment. Ever more important, therefore, the customer relationship management tools and practices are that lead to the growth of customer satisfaction and loyalty and long-term performance of all network members. In the article the results of qualitative researches into the forms and tools used for strengthening relationships with customers - the end users as used by brick-and-mortar pharmacies, online pharmacies and distributors are summarized. The aim of the research was to map the current state - forms and tools used for enhancing customer relationships, the degree of their application, evaluation of their effectiveness, and possibilities of their further use in the development of relationships with customers.

Keywords: customer relationship management, customer value, customer relationships strengthening, forms of relationships strengthening, pharmacies.

Jel classification: M31, L81

1. Introduction

The increasing competitive pressure as a result of globalization and many other influences on the one hand and a decrease in demand caused mainly by persisting economic problems on the other hand significantly affect the economy. Global changes have a significant influence on the behaviour of ultimate consumers and businesses. In these conditions it is increasingly difficult to maintain competitiveness, i.e. the ability to produce and sell specific products, while maintaining profitability (Marinič 2008). Enterprises need to produce products and provide services that bring the target groups of customers such benefits they are willing to buy and pay for them at a reasonable price. The result is a differentiated and individualized customer service, which significantly affects the value-creating process with considerable impact on the efficiency of business.

It is up to individual businesses to develop solutions that target customers will subjectively perceive as advantageous in the long term, i.e. with a value higher than the competitive offer. It is necessary for enterprises to become companies permanently controlled by the customer (Lehtinen 2007). They need to serve the right customers in the right way so that not only a value for customers is created, but also a value for the enterprise. It is increasingly difficult mainly because customers are

becoming more selective and demanding. They require more sophisticated and new products (Storbacka, Lehtinen 2002), and expect higher quality and services, lower prices and generally a higher value for their money and effort expended (Kumar 2008). This means that firms have found themselves in a new and complex competitive environment, in which customers are increasingly demanding the creation of customer value (Sa'ñchez *et al.* 2009). Other important reasons are a low customer loyalty, their increasingly demanding and thus more expensive service and, last but not least, reduction in the economies of scale.

The need to respond flexibly to changing demands and needs of customers under the increasing pressure on costs forces companies to much closer cooperation in value creation. It creates the environment in which the systems controlled by the demand are applied (Vlčková, Paták 2010). Development of relationships is an important strategic element, because relationship specific advantages factors have a significant positive direct effect on the competitive performance/strengths of the firm (Strandskov 2006).

Improving coordination in value creation is made possible by three interrelated changes - by process management, team collaboration and partnership development (Kumar 2008). To ensure the success the enterprise must win the hearts, minds and wallets of its customers (Storbacka, Lehti-

nen 2002). An increasing emphasis is therefore placed on customer relationship management, especially on improving relations and increasing their loyalty based on emotions. A prerequisite for achieving them is identification of strategic segments and choice of an appropriate strategy to operate them in terms of 3V – valued customer, value proposition and value network (Kumar 2008).

It is necessary to invest in the development of knowledge of the main customers and, on this basis, adjust one's own priorities and activities (Kashani 2007). Managing customer relationships in these conditions requires, on the basis of the knowledge of customer requirements and needs, maximum individualization of the offer and customer value creation with respect to his/her value. This requires (Pecinová *et al.* 2011):

- 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 win-win 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.

This article aims to present the forms and tools for strengthening relationships with customers – clients of pharmacies that are used currently in the Czech Republic in selected links of the pharmaceutical value network - Internet and bricks-and-mortar pharmacies and distributors, evaluate the extent of their application and effectiveness and assess the possibilities of their further use in the development of relationships with customers. Sub-objectives are:

- to examine the customer value in the context of enhancing relations with customers,
- to define the nature and appropriate forms of strengthening relationships with customers,

– to present the results of qualitative researches on used forms of strengthening relationships with customers in selected links of the pharmaceutical value network.

The objective will be achieved on the basis of specialized literature research and presentation of results of qualitative researches carried out in 2011. On the basis of confrontation of theoretical knowledge from a research of literature and practices applied towards the end customers - clients of pharmacies – by selected links of the pharmaceutical value network, various forms of strengthening relationships with customers will be described and analyzed, their effectiveness evaluated and possibilities presented of their use for further development of relationships with customers and growth of their loyalty based on emotions.

2. Strengthening relationships with customers

The creation of the unique customer value is considered as the main factor that increases a competitive advantage. In the context of orientation towards development of long-term relationships, customer value determines not only success of attraction of new customers, but the possibilities to maintain customer relationships as well (Dovalienė, Virvilaitė 2008). Long-term relationships are usually more valuable, because the care of existing customers is always cheaper than acquiring new (Bureš, Řehulka 2006), customer retention is therefore more cost-effective than constantly searching for new ones (Ward, Dagger 2007).

Superior customer value is considered to be a key driver of satisfaction, loyalty and retention (Woodall 2003). Customer satisfaction is the basis for enhancing relationships (Kotler, Keller 2007). Factors that affect customer satisfaction have an impact on their behavioural intentions that are related to customer loyalty (Tohidinia Haghghi 2011) and are essential for customer retention (Dovalienė *et al.* 2007). Satisfaction indeed moderates the relationships between service quality and behavioural intentions (Li *et al.* 2010). On the B2C market it is primarily about the understanding values and priorities of end customers. It is difficult to measure how the customer perceives (appreciates) the value of the product, but it is possible to find categories or attributes of the customer value that determine the customer perception of the value (Smith, Colgate 2007, Lošťáková 2009). Companies must evaluate those aspects of customer value proposition that determine the customer's decision to maintain or to terminate relationship with a company (Dovalienė, Virvilaitė 2008). Therefore, it is not enough just to know what benefits the customer receives and what

he/she has to sacrifice. Much more important is to know what attributes of product offered determine these benefits or sacrifices. The value cannot therefore be analyzed in a dichotomous way, but it is a multidimensional concept (Smith, Colgate 2007). It is subjectively perceived by each customer depending on the situation, circumstances and context (product), being relative (compared with alternatives - known, presented, expected) and dynamic (changing over time) (Lostaková 2009). It is a result of expectations and is influenced by factors such as spiritual values, an individual's wishes and experience, reference groups, emotions roused in a purchase process. Individual dimensions affect the perceived value, while some are subjectively more important than others (Vaitkiene, Stankeviče 2010). However, customers' behaviour depends directly on their motivation to act (Anderson, Gaile-Sarkane 2010). Continuous monitoring of perceived customer value from the perspective of customers leads to a deeper understanding of their needs, anticipation of their future requirements and deepening of relations with them (Lošťáková 2009).

For suppliers, in terms of profitability and satisfaction, most valuable are the emotionally tied customers (Lehtinen 2007). The stronger and more positive the mutual emotions are in the relationship with the customer, more permanent this relationship is. 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 (Storbacka, Lehtinen 2002). Through the emotional dimension, the customer loyalty gains a new meaning. In fact, the importance of emotions lies in their persistence (Lehtinen 2007).

The relational orientation means that the company is focused on customer retention by maintaining and enhancing win-win relationships (Ward, Dagger 2007). The purpose of customer relationship management is to deliver the right customer (valued customer), the right value (value proposition) correctly (using the value network) to increase not only his/her satisfaction, but also loyalty and retention. Offering a better customer value, improving relationships and benefiting from their loyalty – they are the objectives of the relationship marketing. It is focused on relationships, networks and interactions (Gummesson 2002). Marketing practice should be adjusted to competitive environment, organization's aims, and, more

importantly, customer preference (Auruškevičienė *et al.* 2007).

As it is necessary to manage the customer relationships, CRM includes the firm's activities that are oriented towards creating and maintaining long-term relationships with customers to obtain their loyalty and satisfaction (Landroguéz *et al.* 2011). The most important CRM processes in terms of maintaining customer loyalty are referrals management and customer information management (Öztaysi *et al.* 2011). By differentiating themselves from competitors and enhancing relationships based on excellent customer experience, the vendor avoids the problem of competing only with a product, service or price.

Increasingly important, therefore, in addition to common transaction benefits, the relational (strategic) benefits are. They help businesses take care of customers and maintain their loyalty. According to Lošťáková, it is the introduction of additional services, regular contact and communication, presentations, leaflets, etc. and creation of special distribution terms, motivating customers to loyalty to a particular company (Lošťáková 2008). Mutual trust and responsibility as accepted by the customer and supplier is an absolutely essential prerequisite for successful cooperation and a promising long-term relationship (Chlebovský 2005).

According to Burnet, four main methods to achieve overall development and strengthening relationships with customers can be found (Burnett 2002, Lošťáková 2009):

- 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 counselling, 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 communication 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 (Bláhová 2011).

An important role in the customer care is played by loyalty programs. It is an integrated system of marketing actions that aims to make member customers more loyal (Leenheer *et al.* 2006). The aim of these programs is to enhance relationships with customers by offering high value to profitable market segments (Wirtz *et al.* 2007). The essence of loyalty programs is in an effort to influence the customer to ensure his/her loyalty to the company or product brand (Zamazalová 2009). They provide benefits and rewards to customers based on the volume of sales that they generate (Omar, Musa 2011). Value of loyalty programme is created by financial (hard) privileges (discounts, gifts, free services related with supply of organization, etc.) and non-financial (soft) privileges (special status, special attention, services not-related with supply of organization and supporting status of programme participant, etc.) (Bagdonienė, Jakštaitė 2007). Loyalty programs allow obtaining 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) (Zamazalová 2009).

Customer relationship management exceeds the boundaries of individual enterprises. It moves beyond single organizations to one that examines whole networks of business (Mouzas 2006). The value network involves the exchange of tangible and intangible values between two or more individuals, groups or organizations aimed at generating economic value and other benefits for network participants (Albadvi, Hosseini 2011, Ippolito 2009). Adopting a contrasting network approach, organizations focus on the value-creating system itself, within which different economic actors – suppliers, partners, allies, and customers – work together to co-produce value (Peppard, Rylander 2006).

It is necessary to build relationships with customers throughout the value network. Bonds and relationships are formed among the various links, enhancing of which has an effect on the stability and effective functioning of the entire network. However, the shape of the network and relationships among its members are determined by the requirements and needs of ultimate customers. Strengthening relationships with them creates conditions for effective functioning of the entire network. An analysis of values and enhancing relationships must therefore begin with the ultimate customers.

3. Research description and method

The primary research objective was to find out what forms of strengthening relationships with customers are used in relation to final customers, i.e. customers of pharmacies, by the selected links of the pharmaceutical value chain and how these are evaluated by the customers. The primary studies examined forms of enhancing the relationships used by the pharmacies and distributors and their ratings by the customers. Divided into 4 concurrently conducted parts, the research was conducted in 2011.

The research in bricks-and-mortar pharmacies. Examined were forms of enhancing relationships applied by bricks-and-mortar pharmacies towards ultimate consumers. The qualitative research was conducted through personal interviews with owners of bricks-and-mortar pharmacies based on a prepared questionnaire. Given the number of respondents, the results of the research cannot be generalized. They serve as a basis for prepared quantitative researches; nevertheless, the results may be considered a probe into the issue.

The research with the clients of the pharmacies. Examined were opinions and evaluations of the clients of the pharmacies related to forms of strengthening relationships with customers as applied by the pharmacies. With the customers who do shopping at bricks-and-mortar and internet pharmacies, were simultaneously measured the perceived differences between these types of pharmacies in the area of strengthening relationships with customers. In terms of the methodology, this was a survey similar to the one with the owners of pharmacies, while their satisfaction was also investigated. In addition to finding information about the current state of the issue examined, its aim was to obtain data for a forthcoming further research.

The research in a bricks-and-mortar pharmacy. Forms were examined of enhancing relationships that are applied by distributors/manufacturers towards the bricks-and-mortar pharmacy or, as the case may be, indirectly towards the final consumer. This was a qualitative research conducted through personal-interviews with the operator of the bricks-and-mortar pharmacy. The research was based on a prepared questioning scenario.

The research in Internet pharmacies. The results of the previous researches are complemented with findings from the studies of strengthening relationships with customers in online pharmacies (Pecinová *et al.* 2011). Forms were examined of enhancing relations that are used by Internet pharmacies to final consumers. Primary research was conducted through online interviews with a complete set of Internet pharmacy owners who currently ran the pharmacy. 22 of 137 pharmacies surveyed responded to the questionnaire, which is 16 %. Given the number of respondents, the results of the research cannot be generalized.

4. Research results and interpretation

Each part of the research is to develop a comprehensive picture of the current state of strengthening relationships with customers in the part of the pharmaceutical value chain in the Czech Republic.

4.1. Research results - bricks-and-mortar pharmacies and clients of pharmacies

The research objective was to find out what forms and tools bricks-and-mortar pharmacies use for strengthening relationships with customers and how they evaluate their effectiveness. At the same time, it was investigated how they perceived the difference between Internet and bricks-and-mortar pharmacies.

More than half of the pharmacies surveyed were part of a chain of pharmacies. The most frequently given number of customers served per day was around 200, the estimated number of customers who buy at the pharmacy repeatedly about 60 %. In terms of the structure of sales, these were pharmacies with predominant over-the-counter sale of medicines and dietary supplements.

All the respondents consider strengthening relationships with customers important; they do not use the help and experience of specialized agencies, most of them considered it important to distinguish themselves from their competitors in this field.

These forms of strengthening relationships with customers were examined: consultancy on dispensing of drugs, sale of OTC drugs and other range, special consultancy in a particular field (health care, homeopathy, child nutrition, weight loss, gluten-free food, medical cosmetics, dietary supplements, natural pharmaceuticals, etc.), offer of additional services (weighing, pressure measurement, body fat measurement, etc.), use of printed leaflets and the option to communicate over the phone. The respondents were asked about other forms they applied, not mentioned in the questionnaire (e.g., surveys, competitions, etc.).

Most respondents believe that customers consider consultancy a way of customer care, not a taken-for-granted part of the sale or dispensing of drugs and is therefore important for strengthening relationships with customers. It is provided by all pharmacies, mostly automatically, especially when dispensing prescription drugs (90 %). When selling over-the-counter drugs and other assortment, automatic consultancy is less common, it is provided by 60 %, or more precisely 70 % of respondents. Most respondents also offer some form of special consultancy (90 %). The most widespread is the consultancy in the field of medical cosmetics and weight loss. Only a small number of the respondents offered baseline measurements and weighing as an additional service. 70 % of the respondents use printed leaflets. The option of telephone communication is offered free of charge by almost three quarters of respondents, in the respondents' opinion it is not used by their clients too much. The assessment of the effectiveness of individual forms of enhancing the relationships indicated that in the respondents' point of view it is primarily various forms of consultancy that are beneficial (considered as beneficial or rather beneficial by almost all the respondents) other services provided are considered as rather positive, while more than half of the respondents considered leaflets and communication over the phone as rather non-beneficial or completely unnecessary. Accord-

ing to most respondents, it is important to provide product samples.

Another part of the research was aimed at strengthening relations with regular customers. 90 % of pharmacies provide regular customers with benefits on the basis of loyalty programs. Most frequently used are points/credits for a purchase of a certain size, discounts on the next purchase and vouchers and other coupons for future purchases while least used are gifts. All forms of loyalty programs were evaluated by the respondents positively (beneficial, rather beneficial on a 5-point scale), while gifts are considered to be the most effective form.

Another part of the research examined the role of the Internet in strengthening relationships with customers. 70 % of the respondents have a website while more than half of them use it to enhance relationships. But the pharmacies seek to keep clients in bricks-and-mortar pharmacies. In their opinion, the advantage of bricks-and-mortar pharmacies is their personal and direct customer contact, possibility of consultation and individual approach (Hošková 2011).

4.2. Research results – clients of pharmacies and bricks-and-mortar pharmacies

The research objective was to determine what forms of strengthening relationships the clients of pharmacies know and make use of, how they assess them, whether they consider them useful and important for repeat purchases, and what other forms of enhancing the relationships they would welcome. Also, satisfaction was determined with the bricks-and-mortar pharmacy and perceived differences between online pharmacies and bricks-and-mortar in this area.

All age groups of respondents were approached, 75 % of them have occasional or chronic health problems. Most respondents visit pharmacy once a month or more often. The respondents choose a pharmacy primarily by its accessibility while other important factors are price and discounts offered. Just less than a quarter of the respondents do not purchase repeatedly in one or a limited number of pharmacies. The respondents are predominantly satisfied with the assortment of the pharmacy as well as with the services offered (opening hours, speed of preparation of drugs, speed of delivery of the drugs ordered), staff and interior of the pharmacies.

Similar forms of strengthening relationships with customers were examined, as in the previous research. Pharmacies provide most respondents with consultancy when dispensing drugs, selling drugs and other assortment. For most patients,

consultancy is especially important with the drugs and dietary supplements picked-up or purchased for the first time. A quality consultancy is important with a repeat purchase at the same pharmacy. Consultancy is considered sufficient - the majority of respondents do not require its extension. Most respondents do not know whether their pharmacy provides special counselling, some of the offered forms are used by only a small portion of them. For the choice of a pharmacy and repeat purchase, however, according to respondents, a special counselling is important. But most of them are not able to answer the question whether they would welcome a broader consultancy. More than half of the respondents do not know whether their pharmacy allows communicating over the phone, while the others believe that pharmacies do not offer this service and nobody uses it anyway. The majority of the respondents do not consider it important for the choice of a pharmacy and repeat purchase or they do not have any opinion about this issue. The majority of the respondents do not use special services offered to customers. Most of them do not consider these services important for selecting a pharmacy and for a repeat purchase or have no opinion on this issue. Half of those surveyed do not know whether their pharmacy provides printed flyers. Customers do not generally use them. For the choice of a pharmacy and repeat purchase it is not an important factor. The respondents do not know about any other form of strengthening relationships with customers (e.g., surveys, competitions), most of them are not interested in them and in terms of choice of pharmacy these are mostly unimportant for them.

Another part of the research was aimed at enhancing relations with regular customers. In their opinion, half of the respondents do not benefit from repeat purchase at the same pharmacy, 50 % of them would welcome the opportunity. The benefits provided are primarily loyalty cards, and to a lesser extent, points/credits, coupons/vouchers and loyalty gifts. Loyalty programs are important for the choice of a pharmacy and repeat purchase, the most frequent response was rather important on a 5-point scale. There is no significant difference among different forms of loyalty programs in the evaluation.

Most clients do not know whether their pharmacy has a website, nearly half of them would welcome the online pharmacy services with their pharmacy store. The difference in customer care between the Internet and bricks-and-mortar chemistry is perceived by more than half of the respondents. They consider the possibility of consulting, personal contact with the staff and the immediate purchase to be the basic advantage of the bricks-

and-mortar chemistry. In their opinion, the Internet pharmacy on the contrary offers convenient shopping, a wider portfolio of products and lower prices (Wagnerová 2011).

4.3. Research results – bricks-and-mortar pharmacy and suppliers

The aim of the research was to find out through personal inquiries at the pharmacy what forms of enhancing relations and forms of care are used by suppliers, how these are evaluated by the pharmacy and what the possibilities are of their use in strengthening relationships with clients of pharmacies.

The research took place in a pharmacy that provides pharmaceutical care to departments and outpatient facilities of a hospital, while ensuring pharmaceutical care for the population. The pharmacy purchases from 19 suppliers, distributors prevail. The pharmacy has a major supplier - distributor (almost 90 % of the supplies), significant in terms of the volume of supplies is another supplier – distributor (nearly 7 %). Forms and tools were evaluated for strengthening relationships with customers used by the two main suppliers. Orders are made mainly via modem or on-line via the Internet.

According to the pharmacy operator, essential tools for enhancing relations between the pharmacy and its suppliers are mandatory training of the employees, suppliers participating in equipping the pharmacy and discounts. The suppliers provide for the employees of the pharmacy compulsory lifelong learning in the form of training, courses, seminars, etc. The suppliers are also involved in equipping the pharmacy – they supply the pharmacy with stands, information displays, promotional posters, signs, stationery, etc. Another forms used are discounts on the goods delivered or parts of the supplies for free.

In relation to end-customers the suppliers are involved in enhancing the relationships by supplying promotional materials, samples, folders for drugs, etc. that the pharmacy uses as gifts. They also hold and organize competitions and surveys for them.

Also this pharmacy makes use of a loyalty program, in the form of points that can be used to purchases at discounted prices (Bláhová 2011).

4.4. Research results – Internet pharmacies and clients of pharmacies

The research objective was to find out what forms and tools for enhancing customer relationships are currently used in online pharmacies, what is their

effectiveness according to the owners and where they see the possibilities of their further use in strengthening relationships with customers.

Pharmacies to have participated in the research are primarily aimed at a wide range of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs and dietary supplements with the range up to 2 000 products. The pharmacies have usually been run for 2-3 years.

Examined were these forms of strengthening relations: online counselling, use of various communication forms and instruments of direct marketing, publication of specialized articles and use of surveys.

Online counselling, as a form of strengthening relationships with customers, is used by more than half of the pharmacies. The use of counselling by the clients was most often assessed on a 5-point scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very often) with the value 2. Counselling is used primarily for advice on the prevention of diseases and taking of medication.

Communication tools like phone, e-mail and SMS are used in pharmacies mainly for everyday communication with customers. The use of telephone communications by their customers was rated by the respondents on the same 5-point scale most often with the value 3. Communication by telephone is used more as a means for solving technical problems and problems with orders and actual sales, rather than as a tool for guidance. E-marketing is used by 60 % of the respondents. Communication via e-mail is used frequently, even more than communication by telephone. E-mail is used to inform customers (on special offers, discounts, etc.), but primarily to solve their problems and counselling. SMS marketing is used only by a fifth of the respondents; moreover, they consider it to be insufficiently effective in most cases. Other tools of direct marketing about which they were interviewed – the use of webinars and on-line chat – are not used by the respondents.

Expert articles on their websites are presented only by a minimum of Internet pharmacies. Their readership was consistently rated on a 5-point scale with the value 3.

Pharmacies seldom use surveys/polls as a form of strengthening relationships with customers. Willingness of customers to fill out the survey is evaluated positively by the respondents. The surveys/polls are related to the popularity ratings of products, selection of products to discount offers or selection of topics for scholarly articles.

Competitions as a form of strengthening relationships with customers are used by a minimum of pharmacies. The respondents do not share the same opinion on the evaluation of the rate of customer involvement.

Some form of loyalty program is used only by a minority of the respondents. The degree of the use of loyalty programs by customers was most often assessed on the 5-point scale with the value 3. As a form of reward, pharmacies use primarily gifts, while other forms – points/credits for a certain order size, discounts on next purchases and coupons for next purchases are used only minimally. Loyalty programs are evaluated mostly positively. Even most of those who do not use them yet evaluated positively the merits of these programs. Respondents who use some form of loyalty programs evaluate their other forms mostly better.

The respondents are generally rather satisfied with the operation of online pharmacy, even more than with the operation of bricks-and-mortar pharmacy, mainly due to lower costs (lower stocks, cheaper operation). The respondents consider combination of both types of pharmacies to be appropriate, although some view the Internet pharmacy only as a way to improve customer service of the bricks-and-mortar pharmacy (Rajhelová 2011; Pecinová *et al.* 2011).

5. Conclusions

The research results showed these main conclusions:

The most important tool for strengthening the relationships with customers is quality counselling. This was agreed on by both the customers and the pharmacy. Bricks-and-mortar pharmacies benefit from personal contact with clients, Internet pharmacies offer online counselling. Suppliers contribute to the quality of counselling by training the staff of the pharmacies for free. Customers are mostly satisfied with counselling on the dispensing and sale of drugs and other assortment; it seems to be advantageous to strengthen various forms of special counselling for the development of the relationships.

Loyalty program are an important tool for strengthening the relationships and a considerable factor for choosing a pharmacy and repeat purchase. This was agreed on by both the customers and the pharmacies. All forms of loyalty programs are positively evaluated; there is no substantial difference in the evaluation of individual forms. The suppliers participate in strengthening relationships with customers by providing rewards and gifts for loyalty programs.

Communication tools such as phone, e-mail or text messages are particularly important for online pharmacies. Clients of the bricks-and-mortar chemists prefer personal contact; most of them do not even know whether their pharmacy

has a website or whether it allows them to communicate in any way other than in person.

Customers are mostly satisfied with pharmacies. The respondents are mostly satisfied with the range of products/goods of the pharmacy, as well as with the offered services (opening hours, speed of preparation of drugs, speed of delivery of these drugs), staff and interior of the pharmacies. The suppliers contribute to customer satisfaction with quick delivery of these drugs, while participating in equipping the pharmacy and training the staff.

A major problem is a fact that customers of the pharmacies do not know at all about many forms of strengthening relationships.

Although the results of research cannot be generalized, they provide interesting information about the perceived level of strengthening relationships with customers and appropriate tools for their further development. At the same time it provides valuable data for preparation of quantitative research aimed at strengthening relationships in the pharmaceutical value network.

This publication is the starting point for a further follow-up research. It will focus on how to identify crucial links of the value network and their role in the process of creating value for the end customer. It will become the basis for recommendations regarding the management of mutual relations in the value network that should help to create competitive advantage of both the firm and the chain.

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