



Product in Dentistry Services: Benefits Obtained by Consumer/Patient from Dental Service

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Abstract. Health care is a specific branch of the economy in which the principles of the free market clash with the activities of the state; however, dentistry is a part of health care in which commercial activity clearly dominates (albeit significantly regulated by legal regulations). Therefore, the competition between entities that provide dental services is significant and is relatively rarely based on the price of medical services but rather emphasizes the benefits that the patient receives by choosing a specific provider. The purpose of this study's research was to identify the benefits and values that dental service consumers obtain based on the product that they receive. The work is based on the case study method and personal observation as part of the implementation of professional duties in 2022–2023. The purpose of dental services is to present them as an extensive product with a wide range of benefits and values that are offered to the consumer. The work also aims to give those entities that operate in this market the opportunity to use good practices and adapt them to their activities.

Keywords: product, benefits, economics of health care, marketing in dentistry, consumer in dentistry

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1. INTRODUCTION

Health care is a specific branch of the Polish national economy. Until recently, it was excluded from the economy. After changing the model of the health care system to one that was largely an insurance model in the 1990s, it became the current industry health care that was followed by the marketization of this activity and the treatment of the patient – not only as a medical case, but also as a consumer (Przybyłka, 2011).

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Researchers who discuss the topic of health care from the economic or managerial sides particularly focus on the description of the health care market as a whole, the functioning of the system, or its financing (Golinowska, 2013; Golinowska & Tambor, 2014; Kantyka, 1998; Markowska & Węglińska, 2019; Nojszewska, 2011). Consumers of these services are relatively rarely the focus of researchers' attention (Janoś-Kresło, 2007), and this topic has been discussed more often by scientists from countries other than Poland; e.g., Metcalfe et al. (2018). In Poland, research has been carried out on the factors that determine consumer behavior in the health care market as well as the impact of marketing activities on triggering specific behaviors, among other topics.

Marketing activities in the health care market can be met with misunderstanding or even resistance (Rudawska, 2004). This may result from the legal provisions that limit the possibilities of promoting medical services in Poland (in particular, the ban on advertising these types of products or the restrictions on physicians appearing in advertisements) (Barańska, 2019). However, this approach may result from a misunderstanding of marketing as such. Marketing is a set of diverse tools that is meant to influence the consumer in order to induce specific behaviors, such as the purchase of goods or services (Przedworska, 2023).

One of the elements that researchers usually mention first in many concepts (such as 4P, 5P, and 7P) is the product (Goi, 2009). It is not simply a good or service that is offered by the seller but is, in fact, a more-or-less extensive set of values that the consumer can receive (Pabian, 2020). Various elements of the product (both material and purely service/simply informational) contribute to a more-complete fulfillment of the consumer's needs (Krawiec & Szymańska, 2017); as a consequence, this can lead to the creation of a competitive advantage over other entities in the same market and help a company achieve its objectives (Wójcik et al., 2018).

The most common product on the health care market is a medical service. This usually consists of elements such as medical examinations and advice, opinions on health, the treatment itself, or various technical activities (for example, those that are related to the preparation of prostheses or orthodontic appliances) (Bukowska-Piestrzyńska, 2011). Particularly notable are the so-called hard components of the service process; i.e., the necessary equipment and supplies of medical equipment and devices, the qualifications and skills of the basic and auxiliary staffs, or the time that is involved in waiting for both the service and the actual implementation process (Krot, 2018).

Under the conditions of a market economy in which business entities must compete with each other, the choice of a product from those that are offered on the market is very rarely only related to meeting the basic need that is the core of the product. The offer must stand out and satisfy any other needs that are related to the main one (in the forms of the elements of a real or extended product). This consumer evaluates the options that are available to him/her and, thanks to the information that is collected, decides to choose the option that will meet his/her needs as fully as possible under the existing conditions (Szcześniak, 2020). Each consumer may value the individual elements of the structure of an offered product differently; in the cases of the adequately identified needs of the market segment that have been selected by the business entity, however, consumer values may be an important competitive

factor (Szymańska, 2022). Consumer value is strongly related to subjective utility. This usefulness can be considered at four levels: form (the material dimension of the offered product); time (waiting for the product, the duration of the service, etc.); place (e.g., in connection with the possibility of reaching the place of business); and ownership (the possibility of also using the product outside the location of the manufacturer/service provider) (Knop-Iwińska & Szymańska, 2015; Smoleń, 2013).

It can be said that a research problem arises as to which benefits and values that consumers of dental services obtain when purchasing a product (dental service); the research goal of this work was to identify these benefits and values. It was hypothesized that it is possible to define the benefits that are obtained by the consumer when providing a dental service that is identified within the different levels of the product structure as understood in a marketing manner.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In particular, the case study method was used in this work. This method employs “a detailed description, usually of a real economic phenomenon (e.g., an organization, the management process, its elements, or the organization’s environment) in order to formulate conclusions about the causes and results of its course” (Grzegorzczuk, 2015). This allows us to present socioeconomic problems. For a more-complete picture of the phenomenon that is being analyzed, it is recommended that subsequent research be carried out using other methods (preferably using a triangulation of research methods) (Pizło, 2009). Researchers recommend using the case study method “when the boundaries between the phenomenon under study and its context are not clearly defined and may have a significant impact on a given phenomenon, as well as, in the study of complex phenomena that involve many variables and elements where not just one outcome is expected or in research that is based on many different sources of evidence” (Kozuch & Marzec, 2014). In the case study method, the purpose of the study may be explorative, descriptive, or explanative (Yin, 2003).

This work uses a description of a dental service from a marketing perspective. Participant observations were also used as a supplement due to the author’s professional activity in the dental facility. This observation was made during the period of September 2022 through April 2023, when the researcher worked as the manager of this entity. This entity operated in the Śląskie Voivodeship (in Bieruń-Lędziny County) in the form of a company according to the civil code. During the period under review, eight dentists and auxiliary staff were employed. The unit provided general dental services (particularly in the fields of conservative dentistry, endodontics [root canal treatment], dental surgery, pediatric dentistry, periodontology, prosthetics, orthodontics, and dental prophylaxis) as well as imaging diagnostics (X-ray and computed tomography). Due to the great diversity of the scope of the services in today’s dentistry, it was decided that, in the case of a case study, it should not be a specific dental service but rather a dental service that is understood as generally as possible (thus representing the widest possible spectrum of medical services in the field of dentistry). This was mainly because many dental facilities (including the facility on which this case study

was based) treat dental service comprehensively. We can therefore talk about a specific system product that consists of individual medical services from various branches of dentistry. The analyses used the basic method of empirical science, i.e. induction, while realizing its imperfections which are also pointed out by researchers who are active in the field of social sciences (Ćwiklicki, 2010; Lisiński, 2016), and, as a supplement, the method of deductive reasoning. This approach provides an appropriate basis for future quantitative and/or qualitative research (Czakon, 2006).

3. BENEFITS OF DENTAL SERVICES – CASE STUDY RESULTS

Regardless of its nature, the structure of a product consists of several basic elements – researchers usually recommend three to five such elements. This is the core of the product; that is, the basic utility of the goods, the real product (i.e., what directly affects the perception of the good), and the extended product (the additional benefits that are offered when purchasing the goods) (Fazan, 2016). The authors of these papers have also pointed to potential products; i.e., certain theoretical innovations that may be initiated in the future but have not yet occurred. In the place of an actual product, Ph. Kotler and K. Keller (2016) proposed two separate levels: an expected product, and a generic product. In the case study that is being discussed, it was decided to refer to a three-element structure; i.e., the core product, the actual product, and the extended product.

In the examined case, the product is a service: "a specific type of activity that consists of the provision of work, which does not result in the creation of a new product" (Czubala et al., 2006; Lotko, 2017). The three-stage structure of a dental service as a product in the marketing sense is presented in Table 1, along with the values and benefits for the patient.

Table 1. *Product structure – dental service as related to benefits and value for consumer*

Entity	Benefits and value for consumer
Core of product	
Providing dental services	Improving or maintaining health (understood as physical, mental, and social well-being)
Real product	
Course of consultation and dental procedure Effect of dental treatment	Comfort during procedure, calmness, sense of confidence Patient's sense of self-confidence after treatment
Improving patient's quality of life Time for providing health services Waiting time for health services after registration	Feeling of being taken care of

Table 1 cont.

Comfortable and convenient days and hours for patient	No immediate health problems after treatment
Punctuality	Saving time, feeling of professional service
Maintaining medical records	Feeling confident in treatment process
Information regarding diagnosis, diseases, proposed treatment process, and risks	
Information about course of treatment	
Information about provided medical services (e.g., on website of dental office)	Sense of decision-making and influence
Possibility of choosing offer	
Digital diagnostics and visualization of expected end result	Striving for intended final effect of treatment
Medical recommendations after procedure	
Medicine prescribed by dentist	
Prevention and hygiene packages after treatment	Awareness of need to maintain effect of dental treatment
Maintaining effect of dental treatment	
Information regarding costs for providing medical services	Sense of financial security
Education, skills, and experience of dentist	
Education, competencies, and experience of support staff	
Medical devices that constitute basic equipment of dental office	
Medical devices that constitute specialized equipment for dental office	
Disinfection and sterilization devices	
Auxiliary equipment for dental office	
Dental materials	
Certificates that confirm quality of provided dental services in office	Sense of medical security
Sense of treatment effectiveness	
Sense of health security (understood as belief that health care services will be properly provided)	
Medicine administered during visit	Sense of security
No pain	
Possibility of contact with dental office staff (personal, telephone, SMS, e-mail, Facebook Messenger, and others)	Time-saving, convenience, and contact that is customized to needs and characters of clients/patients (e.g., introverts)

Table 1 cont.

Entity	Benefits and value for consumer
Extended product	
<p>Readiness for emergency admissions (so-called "pain patients")</p> <p>Repair and maintenance of manufactured dental prostheses</p> <p>Instruction on preventive measures in field of oral hygiene</p> <p>Reducing risk of other oral diseases</p> <p>Easy access to medical records for patient</p> <p>Warranty for provided dental services</p> <p>Warranty for provided dental services (including their scopes, durations, and conditions)</p> <p>Speed and quality of complaint-handling process</p> <p>Possibility to choose various forms of payment for dental services</p> <p>Possibility of financing payments for dental services</p> <p>Customer service (in particular, empathy and professionalism of employees)</p> <p>Reminders of upcoming visits</p> <p>‘ Information about visit after registration</p> <p>Increasing certainty of providing dental service</p> <p>Complementary goods for prevention and oral hygiene</p> <p>Possibility to remotely order preventive and oral-hygiene products and deliver them to patient’s place of residence or collection point</p> <p>Complementary medical services</p> <p>Access to aesthetic medicine services (e.g., whitening)</p> <p>Comfort and time-saving</p> <p>Feeling fully taken care of</p>	<p>Certainty of access to dental services</p> <p>Quality assurance</p> <p>Expanding their competencies</p> <p>Certainty of access to one’s own medical records</p> <p>Certainty of quality of dental services</p> <p>Convenience of payment</p> <p>Increasing financial availability</p> <p>Comfort of using service (including at stage before treatment)</p> <p>Comfort</p> <p>Product package</p>

Like any medical service, the core of a dental service product is the performance of a specific action that is aimed at preserving or restoring health; this health effect is considered to be the primary benefit that a patient/consumer receives. It should be noted that health is broadly defined as one's physical, mental, and social well-being.

As part of a real product, such elements of a dental service have been identified as:

- the course of the medical activities,
- the effect of the treatment,
- the waiting time for the service (from the moment of registration),
- the time for providing the health services (which should be neither too short for the expected medical effect nor too long and tiring for the patient),
- the punctuality of the visit,
- keeping medical records (including in electronic form),
- all information regarding treatment (the diagnosis, course, and visualization of the expected effect), post-treatment recommendations, and prescription drugs as well as the qualifications, knowledge, and experience of the staff (medical [dentists, hygienists, and hygienists] and auxiliary [dental assistants, registration staff, managers]),
- all of the medical and auxiliary devices and office equipment,
- the medications that are administered during the visit (most often anesthesia),
- the various possibilities of contact with the healthcare provider.

Within these product elements, the following values and benefits for a patient/consumer were identified in particular: comfort, sense of self-confidence and certainty of medical quality, peace of mind, sense of being taken care of, quick relief from health problems, sense of agency and co-decision-making, ability to choose according to one's capabilities (also financial), a sense of the need to strive for the final effect of the treatment, a sense of financial security ("can I afford this?"), medical security, epidemic security, a lack of pain, time savings, and a form of contact that is tailored to the client's needs and preferences.

The extended product is identified as the readiness to accept patients who report toothaches, the repairs and maintenance of dental prostheses, educational activities in the field of oral hygiene, easy access to the patient's own medical records, warranties/guarantees for dental services and the complaint process, the possibility of choosing various forms of payment, the possibility of crediting services, patient service (help, empathy, and solving problems and disputes), reminders and information about visits, complementary products (both dental goods and other services), the possibility of the remote ordering of oral hygiene products, and other sales. As part of these activities and product elements, the following benefits and values that are received by the patient/consumer have been identified: the certainty of access to dental services, the certainty of the quality, the extension of one's competencies in maintaining the effects of a dental treatment, minimizing the risk of complications or further diseases, the certainty of access to medical records, increasing financial access to dental treatments, the convenience of payment, comfort and minimizing the stress that is associated with remembering appointments, product packaging, and time-saving.

4. DISCUSSION

Identifying a product's structure elements is, to some extent, subjective and may be different for specific dental services (such as tooth extraction, orthodontics, or prosthetic treatments). However, an attempt was made in this study to approach this topic as comprehensively as possible, as the product was comprehensive dental treatment (not a single specific service).

Within the identified product elements, one can find those that can be classified as activities within the other "P"s of the marketing mix. However, it was decided to treat the product more broadly due to the wide range of values (i.e., in reference to the 4C concept) that the patient/consumer requires and can receive. Of course, price is also such a value and is often a decisive factor when choosing a service provider; however, other values have also been indicated (especially when considering the price differentiation of dental services and the still-insufficient supply in this area) (Rzeźnicki et al., 2018).

It should be remembered that the issues of value and benefits for a client (who is a patient in this case) are also subjective and will result from the preferences and individual needs of each individual, among other things (Majchrzak-Lepczyk, 2019). As indicated in the literature on the subject, "customer value is the surplus of benefits that is subjectively perceived by a customer over the subjectively perceived costs that are associated with the purchase and use of a given product" (Szymura-Tyc, 2005).

Sitarz and Tymczyzna-Borowicz (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic may have been one of the factors that increased public health awareness and that patients may increasingly pay attention to those product elements (dental services) that are not directly related to the treatment itself but may affect their well-being or simply their comfort of life. Therefore, the client/patient view of the service will become more and more comprehensive (Arszułowicz, 2020), and good treatment performance may not be enough. Value management for the customer/patient may be a response to the emergence of those factors that determine the choice of an offer.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Identifying product elements (especially in the cases of service activities) are opportunities to meet consumer expectations. Basically, it does not matter whether a specific element is classified as a real or extended product from a company's point of view – especially in the case of service activities, where the manufacturer is also the seller quite often. However, the most important thing is to identify as many of the elements themselves as possible. This gives the opportunity to first distinguish those elements that are priorities for the company and its customers and then take action to improve them and better match them to the needs that are reported by their consumers.

This is particularly important for enterprises that operate in the healthcare market (including its submarket – the dental services market). Managers and owners of dental healthcare entities do not always realize that the product that they sell offers

patients not only emergency or preventive treatments but also a wide range of benefits that meet the needs of patients/consumers at various levels of the pyramid of needs. Although many offices cannot complain about a lack of patients (i.e., clients) – especially after the COVID-19 pandemic when the oral health of Poles deteriorated according to researchers, e.g., Wójcik et al. (2023), it is necessary to take a long-term view of this issue. Dentistry is the most commercial branch of health care; hence, the increased competition in this market. Competing for price can result in declines in the quality of dental services themselves, which will be unacceptable for many entrepreneurs; therefore, it is worth identifying as many elements of the product as possible that can be developed and, thus, acquiring loyal customers/patients.

Managers of dental entities should identify the benefits that their clients/patients expect and, thanks to the proper preparation of the structure of the products that they offer, meet their needs to the highest possible extent. The case study that is presented in this article may be helpful for them in running their businesses and making management decisions.

This work shows the product of the dental services market from a perspective that researchers have not explored so far. From an economic and managerial point of view, it is a market that is most often ignored by scientists despite its high nominal value; hence, it can be said that the existing research gap is filled somewhat.

Of course, case study research has many imperfections; it refers to a certain section of reality. Those entities that operate on the dental services market have different ownership structures, sizes, and service offerings, and they operate in different regions of the country. For some entities, those elements that are presented as parts of a real or extended product may take on the nature of a potential product. On the contrary, those elements that we could try to present as potential products in this case will already be part of the offers that are provided to patients for other more-innovative entities. To better illustrate the products that are offered, it is worth using qualitative research methods in any subsequent research on this topic – especially individual in-depth interviews (IDI) among the managers and owners of dental entities – as well as quantitative research among consumers to identify their preferences, needs, and purchasing behaviors; this will enable the managers and owners to better address the values and benefits that their clients expect from their service providers.

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