

## Značaj marketinga u sektoru zdravstva

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**Abstrakt:** U savremenom društvu, primena marketing koncepta postaje ključna, čak i u neprofitnom sektoru, uključujući oblasti poput zdravstva, obrazovanja i kulture. Iako marketing nije tradicionalno prisutan u neprofitnim organizacijama, promene u izvorima finansiranja i povećana konkurencija podstiču ove organizacije da preispitaju svoj pristup. Analizirajući uloge marketinga u sektoru zdravstva, naglašavamo potrebu za prilagodljivim strategijama usled dinamičnih okolnosti i neophodnost usvajanja marketing koncepta u svakodnevnom poslovanju zdravstvenih ustanova. Mnoge zdravstvene ustanove nisu u potpunosti shvatile specifičnost zdravstvene usluge u odnosu na ostale uslužne delatnosti, kao ni specifičnost i pojam pacijenta u odnosu na tipičnu mušteriju. Osim zdravstvene nege, osoblje bi trebalo pacijentima pružiti i tzv. kognitivnu i emocionalnu negu. Upravo iz takvih specifičnosti - učestvovanja (participacije) samog pacijenta u svom lečenju, javljaju se i razlozi za stvaranje lojalnosti ili za odustajanje pacijenata od saradnje sa određenom zdravstvenom ustanovom. Korišćenjem brojnih istraživanja iz oblasti relacionog marketinga, ovaj rad teži da ukaže na brojne propuste koje čine zdravstvene ustanove u odnosima sa svojim ili budućim pacijentima. Holistički marketinški pristup može obezbediti priliv novih pacijenata, ali samo kreiranje i održavanje kvalitetnih odnosa sa njima mogu zdravstvenoj ustanovi obezbediti lojalnost pacijenata, kao i šansu za dugoročni rast i razvoj.

**Ključne reči:** marketing, zdravstvene ustanove, CRM

## The significance of marketing in the healthcare sector

**Abstract:** In modern society, the application of the marketing concept becomes crucial, even in the nonprofit sector, including areas such as healthcare, education, and culture. Although marketing traditionally has not been prevalent in nonprofit organizations, changes in funding sources and increased competition encourage these organizations to reconsider their approach. Analyzing the roles of marketing in the healthcare sector, we emphasize the need for adaptable strategies due to dynamic circumstances and the necessity of embracing the marketing concept in the daily operations of healthcare institutions. Many healthcare institutions have not fully grasped the specificity of healthcare services compared to other service industries, nor the specificity and concept of patients compared to typical customers. Besides healthcare, staff should provide patients with so-called cognitive and emotional care. It is precisely from such specificities, such as patient participation in their treatment, that reasons for building loyalty or patient disengagement from a particular healthcare institution arise. By utilizing numerous studies in the field of relational marketing, this paper aims to highlight numerous shortcomings that healthcare institutions make in their relationships with current or prospective patients. A holistic marketing approach can ensure the influx of new patients, but only the creation and maintenance of quality relationships with them can provide healthcare institutions with patient loyalty, as well as the opportunity for long-term growth and development.

**Keywords:** marketing, healthcare institutions, CRM

### 1. Introduction

The turbulent environment and significant market fluctuations have necessitated the implementation of marketing orientation in the activities of non-profit organizations, with a specific focus on analyzing positioning strategies for healthcare institutions as representative entities in the nonprofit sector. By applying the marketing concept in day-to-day operations, the foundation is laid for the long-term and successful functioning of these institutions, emphasizing the importance of timely and thorough strategic positioning.

There is a clear trend in which many non-governmental organizations increasingly recognize the value of a marketing approach in achieving their own, as well as broader societal goals. Philip Kotler, one of the most prominent marketing theorists of the 20th century, researched the introduction of marketing into non-profit organizations and confirmed the importance of this approach, particularly in the areas of resource management and quality service delivery. This responsibility is measured through performance indicators and public response, rather than solely through profit, making the modes of analysis more complex compared to the private sector.

In the era of globalization in business activities, pathways have opened up for a more extensive offering of products and services, surpassing the actual demand in the market. Competition, both between public and private healthcare institutions and among public institutions, sets the foundation for improving the quality of services and products. This dynamic requires a fundamental shift in the approach of healthcare institutions to the healthcare services market. Key prerequisites for successful transformations include: a comprehensive analysis of the needs and desires of users, thorough research on the healthcare services market, and strategic marketing planning with precisely defined objectives, strategies, and tactics.

When choosing a marketing strategy, it is necessary to take into account the complexity of the individual - the patient, whose behavior is influenced by various demographic, psychological, sociological, economic, and other factors. From a marketing perspective, these factors represent uncontrollable variables, emphasizing the importance of continuously monitoring and studying the behavior of actual and potential patients to effectively respond to their needs at the time of service delivery. The goal of a healthcare institution is to provide the highest quality, fastest, and most comfortable healthcare treatment to patients, thus striving to become recognizable and unique. Formulating an appropriate strategy to achieve set goals requires detailed marketing research.

Traditional healthcare providers are facing increasing competition from new market players, such as independent private clinics and laboratories, as well as alternative service providers in the field of health preservation. Additionally, the days of unlimited state resources are a thing of the past. Today, achieving cost efficiency, reallocating resources in areas with the greatest health gain, and using performance indicators and service standards are crucial needs.

The notion that hospitals should not strive for profit is outdated, and in today's dynamic healthcare environment, organizations that do not keep up with trends risk becoming obsolete. The efficient operation of non-profit healthcare organizations requires adaptation and alignment with market conditions, making the marketing philosophy crucial. The primary purpose of a marketing approach in healthcare is to focus on the healthcare services market, identify users, analyze competition, and tailor, develop, and align operations to more efficiently meet user needs. Defining a mission is crucial for aligning the operations of healthcare organizations with market conditions. This involves answering questions such as: Who are the users of the targeted service? What are the organization's vision and goals? What advantages does the organization have compared to the competition? Who are the relevant stakeholders whose interests the organization should satisfy?

Given all the challenges mentioned and the context in which healthcare institutions operate, considering the importance of applying the marketing concept and the necessity of strategic thinking in this sector, this paper will analyze the process of strategic positioning of healthcare institutions, exploring key decisions regarding the target market, products, promotion, pricing, and distribution. The paper will present a theoretical and practical framework for improving the relationships between healthcare institutions and patients based on the concept of relational marketing. Specifically, it will analyze how relational marketing strategies influence the improvement of relationships between healthcare institutions and patients.

## **2. Research Methods**

Technological progress has led to the generation of vast amounts of data that have been collected, compiled, and archived, making them easily accessible for research. Due to this easy accessibility, the use of existing data for research purposes is becoming increasingly common, involving the application of secondary data analysis. The primary methodology of this research relies on the analysis of secondary data. Secondary analysis demonstrates a high degree of flexibility and can be applied in various ways, such as empirical exercises, systematic procedures with clearly defined steps for assessment, similar to those used in collecting and evaluating primary data. There are numerous methods of secondary research,

and this paper will use content analysis. The goal is to gain a better understanding of the issues related to this topic through the analysis of existing research in this field. This will not only provide a better framework for the main survey but also identify global trends for comparison with the situation in the domestic Serbian market.

In addition to secondary data, a survey-based research method was used. For this purpose, a questionnaire focused on the marketing activities of healthcare institutions and their interaction with patients was developed. This research instrument covered aspects such as traditional advertising, the use of internet marketing, the use of specific software and internet tools for patient relationship management, and more. The presentation of the questions posed and the results obtained will be provided in the next section of the paper in tabular format. The survey was conducted on employees of private healthcare institutions in November 2023, with a total of 30 respondents (employees in private hospitals and clinics, medical practices, dental offices, gynecological offices, and private laboratories).

For the purposes of this study, various survey methods will be applied, including paper-and-pencil interviewing (PAPI), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). Quantitative methods enable the collection of data from a large number of respondents, focusing on numerical information such as counting, ranking, and analyzing the correlation and prediction of phenomena in the population. The results obtained, after statistical analysis of the collected data, will be presented in tabular format.

The conducted survey aims to collect data on the extent to which private healthcare institutions in Serbia implement relational marketing in their operations. The ultimate goal of the research is to obtain answers to questions related to the attention given to the satisfaction of employees and clients, advertising strategies and channels used, identification of any errors in approach, and compliance with global trends. The survey results will be systematically presented in the next section of the paper, organized by themes outlined in the survey itself.

### **3. Results and discussion**

The dynamic evolution of life has profoundly influenced the development of healthcare systems, causing significant changes and emphasizing the crucial role of marketing in the field of health. Healthcare is continuously evolving, providing numerous opportunities that stimulate the creativity, enthusiasm, and dedication of professionals in this field. The specificity of healthcare marketing lies in its interdisciplinary nature, employing specific concepts, methods, and techniques to address the challenges of both classical and social marketing. This field differs in that it relates to the provision of services and the creation of markets but without a direct equivalent in money. The effectiveness of marketing strategies is reflected in creating an image of a healthy population, recognizing the category of chronically ill individuals, etc. The application of marketing in healthcare has become imperative due to the challenges in the healthcare sector. Healthcare marketing plays a supportive role in healthcare practices by facilitating communication between service providers and patients. Additionally, marketing contributes to identity formation, actively promoting that identity with the intention of attracting new patients.

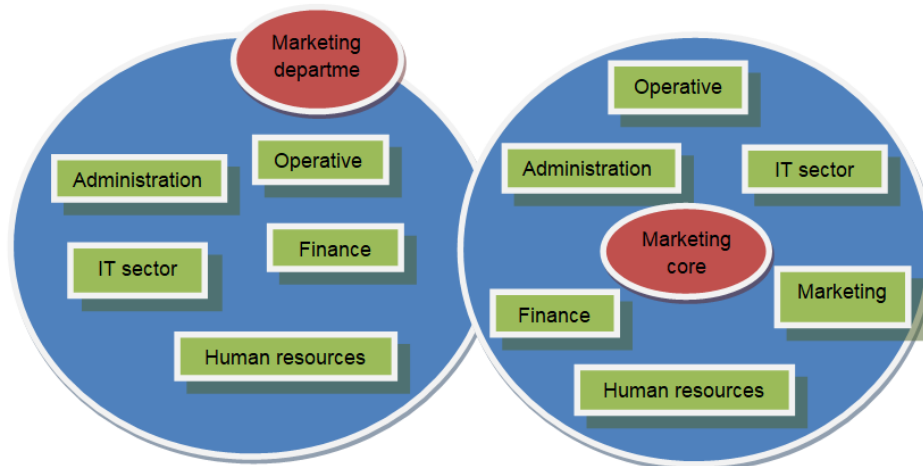
An effective marketing approach involves in-depth investigation of the patients' needs, identifying latent needs and offering new health services that patients have not explicitly requested (Purcerea, 2019).

Marketing is a societal and managerial process through which individuals and groups obtain what they need or want by creating, offering, and exchanging products of value with others (Kotler, 2012). There are two key aspects that are essential to understanding the role of marketing in healthcare organizations. On a conceptual level, marketing represents a philosophy or management approach that places the rights of customers at the center of all organizational activities. The functional level of marketing encompasses the part of the organization that conducts research, assists in designing new services, determines their pricing, distributes them, and ultimately promotes them among customers.

Marketing can be viewed as a functional role added to the organization. When this model is applied in the healthcare system, the conclusion is drawn that the services provided by the organization are not optimally tailored to users, and the marketing function would lack resources for activities other than promotion.

Conversely, when organizations perceive the marketing function as a guiding philosophy shaping strategic directions, healthcare institutions would tailor and create their services to maximize value for the patient. In such an approach, the marketing function would research the market, develop new products, and deliver them to end-users. The concept of incorporating marketing implies the presence of marketing representatives at all levels of the organizational structure and in every department of the organization.

Figure 1. Marketing as an added discipline or as a managerial function



Source: (Sargeant, 1999)

The use of marketing strategies in healthcare organizations brings numerous advantages: identification of all users or target groups within the organization, determining their specific needs, more efficient fulfillment of identified needs of users and target groups, reduction of overall operating costs of the organization, development of communication programs to connect the organization with its environment.

Among healthcare professionals, marketing has not enjoyed great popularity (mostly because most healthcare workers equated it with advertising), but it seems that this perception is outdated, and today it is evident that marketing has evolved from being understood solely as "advertising" to a more comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of healthcare service users (Ouschan et.al, 2006). Private practices and large healthcare institutions must embrace this patient behavior and provide desirable healthcare and other services. Satisfied patients become "loyal customers" and thus contribute positively to success not only based on their personal experience but also based on the recommendations they give to their acquaintances.

Healthcare organizations should regularly conduct their own market research to obtain vital information about potential users of their services. This research can be survey-based and conducted in person, over the phone, or through the internet. When it comes to current users of healthcare services, a brief survey about their experience, likes, and dislikes can always be conducted upon the patient's discharge from the facility. These data can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the marketing department and increase satisfaction among healthcare service users, resulting in greater loyalty (Bodet, 2008).

In a situation where a nonprofit organization provides a service, it is crucial for marketing to be integrated into every segment of the organization to achieve a comprehensive marketing concept rather than individual and transient marketing activities. The higher the level of staff engagement in promoting the organization's image and corporate culture, the greater their commitment, motivation, and productivity will be, resulting in more satisfied users. In modern business, a crucial area is the marketing mix, which constitutes a combination of controlled marketing tools that a company applies to achieve the expected level of sales in the target market. The basic elements of the marketing mix are product, price, distribution, and promotion (Kotler, 2012), but services marketing often encompasses both B2C and B2B sectors, including telecommunications, financial, hospitality, healthcare, retail, and similar services. Organizations engaged in these service activities often incorporate the so-called extended marketing mix into their marketing plan, composed of seven elements: product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process.

The perspective for expanding and modifying the services marketing mix first took hold at the inaugural conference of the American Marketing Association dedicated to services marketing in 1981, based on earlier theoretical work highlighting many significant limitations of the 4P concept (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). At that conference, Booms and Bitner proposed the 7P model, which includes the original four Ps plus three additional ones - processes, people, and physical evidence, as a more applicable model for services marketing (Javalgi et al., 2006). Since then, the 7P model has become widely accepted and has been implemented in healthcare as well. The marketing mix represents a blend of different marketing elements tailored to meet the rational desires and needs of healthcare consumers. With this approach, healthcare institutions can not only survive in the market but also achieve further development.

Today, it can be freely stated that the development of the concept of long-term customer relationships is a global trend. The philosophy of marketing has changed, shifting from the traditional 4P marketing and product/service orientation to a customer-centric approach. It is well known that acquiring a new customer is much more challenging than retaining an existing one. That's precisely why companies implement the concept of relationship marketing, also known as CRM (Customer Relationship Marketing).

Figure 2. - Marketing miks 7P



Source: (Sukotjo & Radix, 2010)

CRM, as an approach, is based on creating, developing, and strengthening business relationships between the organization and specific consumer segments. The primary goal of this approach is to enhance the quality of communication between the organization and consumers, strengthen business collaboration, increase profitability, and improve value, primarily for consumers but also for all other relevant stakeholders. CRM is essentially a managerial approach rather than a technological concept. Through the use of hardware solutions and software applications, this concept helps organizations more efficiently identify "valuable" clients and direct their activities toward them. At the same time, it supports consumers, enabling them to satisfy their needs quickly and efficiently, while building positive relationships with organizations that demonstrate care for them and tailor their offerings to their specific requirements.

Relationship marketing as a process refers to activities and tasks aimed at collectively achieving set marketing goals. This business process can relate to a group or activities through which organizational inputs (employee ideas, etc.) are transformed into desired outputs (new services, new ways to connect with customers, etc.). Such groups and activities can be further aggregated in the process at a higher or lower level (Eppler, 2006). When discussing the healthcare sector, viewing relationship marketing as a process would mean organizing activities that are focused on establishing and maintaining long-term and high-quality relationships between healthcare institutions and users of healthcare services.

At the core of RM as an integral part of holistic marketing lies a business approach that involves creating attractiveness between service users and the service organization, which can result in the establishment of a relationship that is mutually beneficial for both parties (Gronroos, 2007). Establishing such a relationship and the resulting connection with the service user leads to lasting, long-term, and profitable growth, as opposed to one-time transactional sales, representing the essence and main goal of relationship marketing (Sanchez, 2003). In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the use of social media

in various service industries, including the healthcare sector, as part of a modern trend. Social media is increasingly being used to establish, maintain, and nurture long-term relationships with healthcare service users. Although this trend is relatively new in the field of healthcare, its significance is not negligible. Considering the specificities that distinguish healthcare services from others and the role that patients play in relational marketing, social media becomes a key factor in establishing connections between healthcare institutions and users. The appeal of digital communication is actually based on fulfilling basic human needs, such as the need for connection with other people (Gross, 2018). Every effort invested in communication and relationship marketing in the digital world is worthwhile because a positive customer experience in communication increases their overall satisfaction by 33%. When companies respond to customers via social media, those same consumers spend 40% more than those who do not receive a response (Barry et al., 2011).

Table 1 – Basic Characteristics of Public and Private Healthcare Institutions

Key Characteristics	Public Healthcare Institutions	Private Healthcare Institutions
<b>Ownership and management</b>	State-owned, management under direct supervision of state institutions	Private, management under direct supervision of owners or managers
<b>Objectives</b>	Public interests, providing public services, and achieving social welfare	Profit generation for owners or shareholders
<b>Founded</b>	Funded from the state budget	Funded from private sources, investments, or regular operations
<b>Market competition</b>	State enterprises have a significant monopolistic position	Competing in the market and subject to free market rules

The healthcare sector is undergoing significant transformations in most developed countries, facing challenges from both growing public expectations and competition among healthcare service providers. Traditional healthcare providers are now facing new competitive pressures from new players, such as independent private laboratories and clinics, as well as alternative services focused on health preservation. Patients staying in hospitals are no longer just patients; they have become consumers of hospital services, with the potential to choose where they will be hospitalized in the future.

Currently, patients face a lack of information, control, and options, with access problems expressed through high prices and unjustifiably long waiting periods. To cope with these challenges, the healthcare sector needs more proactive engagement and participation of society in the decision-making process. Healthcare organizations must develop strategies that adapt the healthcare system to the needs of consumers. Special attention should be given to health promotion and preventive measures. Creating a healthcare system where the voice of users drives change is crucial for meeting growing societal expectations and demands.

The state of public and private hospitals can be analyzed from various perspectives, but key points of observation can be grouped into financing, access and waiting times, as well as treatment costs. Public hospitals are usually funded from public sources (taxes), and funds are often limited, which can affect the level of equipment and the quality of services. Private hospitals are funded from private sources (patient payments) and insurance, leading to larger budgets and better equipment.

Another point of observation is the approach to patients and waiting lists, where significant problems may arise. Patients in public hospitals often face longer waiting times due to limited resources or a higher number of patients, while patients in private hospitals have faster and higher-quality access to services (this leads to a more personalized approach – a closer relationship with the patient). The third point is the costs, which are directly on the side of the state apparatus, i.e., services in public clinics are free for patients, alleviating the financial burden, while services in private practice are charged, increasing the overall treatment costs for patients.

Public healthcare institutions are often criticized for perceived inefficiency and lack of effectiveness. An excessive number of employees contributes to administrative complications and increased costs, diminishing overall efficiency. Additionally, the lack of marketing activities makes them less competitive

in the healthcare services market. Non-profit organizations, including state healthcare systems, are often resistant to change, and bureaucratic processes hinder problem identification and resolution.

State healthcare systems frequently exhibit unsatisfactory outcomes due to a lack of organization efficiency evaluation systems (human and material), funding regardless of market conditions, and the monopolistic position of healthcare institutions. Communication within these organizations, both vertical and horizontal, is often underdeveloped and not directed towards the needs of end-users - patients. These shortcomings often lead to the conclusion that these institutions primarily function to maintain the status quo and retain staff, rather than actively striving for changes that would improve the quality of services provided. The absence of user trust, resulting from their sense of neglect by these organizations, is a key driver of the privatization of many services, including private practices and clinics.

Many public services are provided "free" in the sense that the user does not pay directly for the service during its use. From this, it can be inferred that if the price is not transparently included in the transaction, and competition is limited, the need for marketing may seem unnecessary. However, all products and services require funding in some way, and the user ultimately bears the costs, even if this occurs indirectly, such as through tax payments.

The research was centrally conducted through a survey, involving 30 participants. Survey participants represented private healthcare institutions, including hospitals, clinics, medical, dental, and gynecological practices, private eye clinics, and laboratories. The aim of the survey was to gain insights into the general situation regarding the relationships between healthcare institutions and their service users. Through the posed questions, the survey sought to provide answers to key questions regarding the implementation of relational marketing in the healthcare field.

Regarding the use of CRM software, the research revealed that 51% of private healthcare institutions use some CRM software solution. This may include software installed on their computers or online software used with a free or monthly subscription. Employees, not only in the healthcare sector but also in other industries, often show resistance to change. The introduction of CRM systems and the need for intensive daily use can pose an additional challenge for healthcare workers, considering the new tasks without appropriate financial compensation for the extra effort. Therefore, it often happens that healthcare institutions have implemented a CRM solution for practicing relationship marketing, but employees do not use the system frequently enough due to the additional time required for data entry and similar tasks, reducing the full potential of the software.

Healthcare service users increasingly search a variety of websites and social media before deciding on the appropriate healthcare facility. However, a concerning fact indicates that even 25% of surveyed healthcare facilities do not have their own website. In the modern digital age, the absence of online presence is often considered an evasion from reality. Nevertheless, healthcare facilities without their own website manage to survive, considering the importance of the "word of mouth" marketing strategy in the decision-making process for choosing a healthcare institution. As trust is a key factor in selecting a healthcare facility, it is important to pay attention to the profiles of healthcare professionals on websites. Research has revealed that among healthcare facilities with a website, a significant 60% do not include profiles of healthcare professionals, while only 40% provide this information. The presence of healthcare professionals' profiles on the website can significantly increase the level of trust among visitors, bringing them closer to the decision to use the services of a specific healthcare institution whose website they visit.

Table 2 - Marketing of healthcare institutions and patient relations

<b>Does your institution use any customer relationship management (CRM) software solution to manage service relationships with customers?</b>		
Yes - 51%	No - 49%	
<b>Does your institution have a website (presentation) on the internet?</b>		
Yes - 75%	No - 25%	
<b>If the previous answer is YES, does your institution have profiles of healthcare workers on the website (education, work experience, etc.)?</b>		
Yes - 40%	No - 60%	
<b>Does your institution use digital relationship marketing (social media) to establish and maintain connections with customers (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)?</b>		
Yes - 67%	No - 33%	
<b>Does your healthcare institution advertise (use advertising)?</b>		
Yes - 88%	No - 12%	
<b>In line with the previous question, does it use traditional channels – radio, TV, newspapers, billboards; and/or modern/digital channels – email marketing, social media, etc.?</b>		
Traditional - 38%	Modern - 35%	Both - 27%
<b>Who is in charge of marketing in your healthcare institution?</b>		
Healthcare workers - 42%	Marketing workers - 22%	External - 36%
<b>Can you confidently say how many (loyal) patients your healthcare institution has?</b>		
Yes - 32%	No - 68%	

Source: Authors' research - conducted survey

On platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube, information, news, knowledge, and interests are actively shared, communicated, advertised, and various other activities take place. In today's life, the concept of social media has become indispensable, and users use them to varying degrees. Social media represent a central place where users spend their time, making them fertile ground for marketing activities. However, beyond mere advertising, social media offer the possibility of establishing meaningful, quality, and long-term relationships with users, as well as building the brand of a healthcare institution. Survey research has revealed that 67% of healthcare institutions have profiles on social media, mainly on Facebook. However, a more detailed analysis of profiles shows that many of them have not been active for several years.

In an era where it is expected that all service sectors employ some form of advertising, whether traditional through newspapers, radio, television, or modern through social media, content, video materials, and the like, 12% of healthcare institutions claim not to engage in advertising in their operations. These entities recognize a lack of time in the existing workforce to perform these activities but simultaneously do not hire marketing agencies to handle these tasks. Such an approach is not advisable because these healthcare institutions rely too much on the "word of mouth" method. Given the specific nature of healthcare services, it is important to diversify marketing strategies to achieve a broader reach and attract the attention of different target groups.

It is crucial for healthcare institutions to have a clear understanding of the number of users loyal to their healthcare services. This insight allows for better financial planning and business management in the future, as well as the creation of effective marketing campaigns aimed at maintaining and building long-term relationships with existing and potential healthcare service users. However, research results indicate that only 32% of healthcare institutions have accurate information about the number of their loyal



patients. This fact largely depends on the institution's commitment to its users and the use of appropriate Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software, which enables tracking and effective communication with patients.

From these results, the conclusion is drawn that investing in the implementation of relationship marketing, especially in the technological segment such as CRM software, is highly recommended. This not only allows the organization to precisely identify target patient groups and tailor messages to them through various channels but also provides a platform for tracking and improving relationships established with users over time.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this study, the specificities of healthcare services were emphasized as a unique form of service provision. The main focus was on confirming the crucial importance of relationship marketing for healthcare institutions, especially in the context of building and maintaining long-term relationships with healthcare service users. Through the analysis of various aspects, the paper aimed to identify conditions essential for increasing the loyalty of healthcare service users.

As presented in the research results, healthcare institutions are faced with the continuous need to develop their own brand and highlight elements that set them apart from the competition. Aspects such as location, working hours, and the expertise of employees become crucial in shaping vision and mission statements, serving as guidelines for directing towards set objectives. It is important to note that these statements are often communicated internally, necessitating efforts to establish effective communication with the wider public to attract the target audience of healthcare service users.

Today's healthcare service providers are challenged to expand their advertising and presentation beyond traditional clinical outcomes. Patients increasingly seek and expect ancillary services that go beyond basic medical treatments they receive. Modern patients set high standards and expectations regarding the quality of services provided by healthcare institutions. On the other hand, there is also a minimum acceptable level of quality they are willing to accept. The difference between these levels of desired service quality and the minimum adequate service creates the "zone of tolerance."

The research results, along with informal interviews and conclusions from other research methods, clearly show that successful healthcare institutions maintain constant communication with users of their services, not limiting it to a specific day of the week or month but doing so daily. In today's highly competitive environment, building strong relationships with consumers, clients, or healthcare service users becomes essential for success, making it a key element of every marketing strategy. Quality customer relationships represent a vital factor for the prosperity of healthcare institutions, with a special emphasis on branding and the application of relationship marketing. In the healthcare sector, this concept becomes particularly important as it contributes to value creation, building a strong brand, and differentiation from the competition.

People worldwide are increasingly accepting social media as an efficient means of rapid communication. Healthcare professionals should incorporate various social media channels into their marketing plans to actively communicate with patients. Engagement on different platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, and Twitter allows doctors to monitor how patients perceive healthcare and what their expectations are. Directly connecting with patients through social media provides insight into their concerns about healthcare services, current health issues, and general information about their health.

If the question is posed as to whether the implementation of the concept of relationship marketing improves the relationships between private healthcare institutions and patients, the answer is unequivocally affirmative. Relationship marketing, as an intelligent approach, provides healthcare service providers with the opportunity to enhance market position, build a brand, and achieve business objectives. This approach can serve as a strategic tool for achieving marketing goals, as well as for managing and developing long-term relationships with healthcare service users.

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