

COMMUNICATING CUSTOMER VALUE AND THE INFORMATION GAP

SŁAWOMIR CZARNIEWSKI

Abstract: *Lack of knowledge or skills is the cause of the gap of knowledge and skills, or the asymmetry of knowledge between consumer and vendor (service provider). That gap may be filled to a large extent through the process of communicating specified values and benefits to the customer. This process should, however, be effective and efficient. So, the article presents the author study results of the factors determining process of market communication in Polish enterprises. This analysis was carried out on selected Polish companies in 2011.*

Keywords: *communication, gap of knowledge, new values*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The consumer does not always have comprehensive information about the products and services that interest him. The knowledge gap of consumers has been the subject of much literature (Dąbrowska 2005) and is one of the main reasons for the legal protection of consumers and educational activities in consumer policy aimed at them. Special attention is paid to the consumer's lack of access to full market information and their lack of knowledge and experience in shopping (this certainly does not apply to all consumers). It should also be noted that a significant number of consumers do not have sufficient knowledge of the law and economics. Lack of knowledge is the cause of the gap of knowledge and skills, or the asymmetry of knowledge between client and vendor (service provider). This gap is wider than what is discussed extensively in economics and management sciences (market theory) as the concept of asymmetric information, since it includes not only having access to information, but also the ability to use it. The topic of consumer vulnerability is primarily discussed in economic literature. What is stressed is the lack of consumer access to complete information, and their lack of knowledge and experience in shopping, which is difficult to obtain because of the rapid pace of changes in the market and the lack of technical, commodity, legal and economic knowledge. That gap may be filled to a large extent through the process of communicating specified values and benefits to the customer. This process should, however, be effective and efficient.

2. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CONSUMERS AND THE NEW AGE CONSUMER

The market as a whole, and hence different market players, are constantly changing. It is impossible not to mention the transformations taking place in consumer behavior. It should be noted that today's consumer has entirely different characteristics than what is traditionally expected (Table 1).

The new age consumer is well informed. This is due to the fact that he functions in the information age. With access to unprecedented amounts of information, the consumer can make decisions based on more complete knowledge of things (Pralhad 2005). At the same time, as

an engaged consumer, he takes a long time to make a decision, he compares products to one another, looks for additional information, and after making a purchase, evaluates the extent to which the product is able to satisfy his needs. It should be added that today's consumer pays great attention to the quality of the product. The requirements made on manufacturers and service providers are clearly rising (Fejgenbaum 2000). The customer is willing to pay a higher price for a product or service, provided that the offer meets his needs and gives him adequate benefits. Needs, tastes and expectations of the customer change over time. Thus, the primary task of functioning companies is to offer products that meet new customer needs.

Table 1 The main differences between traditional consumers and the new age consumer

Traditional consumer	New age consumer
Seeks comfort	Seeks authenticity, new values - benefits
Adapts to other consumers, to the market	Emphasizes their individuality and assumes new consumer values.
Less involved in the selection and purchase of products	Clearly involved in the selection and purchase of products
Conformist	Independent
Less informed	Well-informed

Resource: developed by the author.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM OF A COMPANY WITH THE MARKET

Just an offer of products is not enough for a company to remain on the market. There is a need to inform customers about new products or changes in the product offer of the company (Table 2.)

There is no doubt that today's consumer has adopted new consumption values. Consumer society is no longer based on the quantitative growth of consumption - it is being replaced by higher quality of consumption and a higher quality of life. There is a consumer desire for personal development. Consumers increasingly value their free time and attach greater importance to values such as health, good physical form, and youth (Mazurek-Łopacińska 2002).

Table 2 Objectives of the communication system of a company with the market

Objectives of the communication system	The number of companies which gave specific indication	Percentage of total firms
Maintaining or increasing sales volume Communicating product range	12	70,6
Acquiring new customers - recipients of services	8	47,1
Creating a positive image of the company	7	41,2
Competition with competitors, gaining an adequate competitive position	6	35,3
Increasing knowledge of the company, its products and brands	4	23,5
Invoking impulsive purchasing	3	17,6
Strengthening the loyalty customers to the company, its products and brands	3	17,6
Intention to reduce stocks of lower quality	2	11,8

Source: own research based on surveys conducted among companies in Poland in 2011.

The communication system of a company with the market should take into account the new qualities of the consumer. After all, the expectations of today's consumers are much higher (e.g. more information about the characteristics of the product, methods of preparation, etc.) than the traditional consumer. Therefore a proper, effective process of communication customer value is important.

The importance of marketing communication can be addressed on two levels:

- the sender - the company
- the recipient of the message - buyers of the products on offer.

At the level of the company, the role and importance of marketing communication is related to its prominence among the company's set of instruments for implementing marketing strategy. The company undertakes promotional activities in order to accomplish its mission and development strategy (Meyer 2006). Marketing communication is one of the main - next to the product, price and distribution - tools which have impact on the market. Through the use of the communication system, a company can realize multiple marketing objectives:

- encouraging the purchase of certain goods (transmitting information characterizing the qualities of the product offered and the benefits of acquiring it, compared with a set of benefits offered by competitors),
- overcoming the barriers of ignorance about the company and its products,
- striving to gain an advantage over competitors,
- promoting the image of the company.

The process of communicating specified value allows for the bridging of the gap between the product on offer and the potential buyer. This distance can be reduced by two different approaches of communicating with the market:

- bringing the buyer to the product - this is possible through the use of instruments directly influencing

demand (advertising and public relations). These instruments, performing the functions of informing and stimulating, "carry" the purchaser through the initial phases of the purchasing process,

- bringing the product to the customer - this is possible through personal sales and complementary promotional techniques. The main purpose of these instruments is to create and develop the attractiveness of the offer the company is making.

The marketing communication system creates opportunities for the company to achieve success on the market. This depends on two facts:

- promotion is a prerequisite for the creation of a group of regular, satisfied and loyal customers
- promotion creates an opportunity to reduce failure when competing on the market (Sztucki 1995).

It should be noted that through the communication system, the consumer recognizes that the company is offering to adapt to individual needs and preferences. Through the process of communication, the consumer (service user) receives information about the product, its properties, characteristics, conditions of use. Promotion allows for the evaluation of competitive bids (this is done through popular magazine rankings of cars, washing machines, schools, travel agencies, etc.). Through the communication system, the buyer receives information about the company, its mission, products on offer, involvement in charity, etc.

The system of communicating specified value can also cause negative consumer opinion about a company and its products. The premise for such opinions may be due to the disruption of the basic informational function of media (television, radio, newspapers) with too intense publicity, such as interrupting films with advertising breaks. Negative opinions also arise in situations when the form of promotion used is unacceptable to the group of recipients (too high a dose of violence, eroticism, strong stimuli, transcending accepted social values and ethical norms, etc.)¹. Visible and serious consequences of this state of affairs can be customers going to the competition, decline in sales, deterioration of image, and reduction of a company's market value. The communication process is a natural feature of marketing orientation and constitutes an important mechanism for the functioning of the modern market. It is therefore the result of the objective processes of its development (Rapacz 2005). It should be noted that the role and importance of marketing communication increases with the growth and diversification of the market.

It should also be noted that with the development of the market and the emergence of new distribution channels, existing communication tools may not be sufficient. These conditions require the creation of an intentional, extensive communication system with broad functionality, with powerful instruments for their implementation, integrated with other businesses marketing tools.

¹ In order to reduce the risks posed by promotion, legal institutions are created. These relate to the legal regulation of advertising and other forms of promotion. Another important role is played by the consumerism institutional movement which also protects consumer interests.

During the communication process, companies have a tendency to make far-reaching promises that they are not able to keep. In particular, this problem relates to companies wanting to set higher standards in business associated with better quality of products, higher levels of service, paying greater attention to the natural environment, and higher ethical standards. With such declarations, companies create expectations among consumers (stakeholders) which they are not able to fulfill later. S.A. Greyser calls such situations "the promise/performance gap" (Greyser 1999). The existence of such gaps undermine the image of the company.

There is no doubt that the development of new computer and telecommunications technologies has led to a reduction in physical distance between people and countries, and has caused the "shrinkage" of time and space (Gołaszewska-Kaczan 2009). Ubiquitous Internet has allowed for the demonopolization and democratization of information flow. From a technical point of view, information from anywhere in the world has become available at a low cost and in a very short time (Kasprzak 2003). More and more companies are interested in new technologies supporting and optimizing educational processes (distance learning systems, transmission of specified value). Generally e-learning can be characterized as a controlled method of transferring knowledge (usually at a distance) based on electronic media (Stecyk 2008). Modern forms of education (communicating specified value) may also be directed at selected trading partners and / or customers. E-learning is a very good solution for the implementation of trainings for business partners and end users, for the provision of information about products and

services, and as support for end users through the use of knowledge databases.

4. CONCLUSION

New companies are opening which specialize in various activities - marketing, events, mobile marketing, etc. This is due to the development of the market and of the specific skills needed within particular specializations. Another clear trend is the use of the potential of technological developments: SMS, MMS, and mobile marketing. In addition, customers have increased access to the Internet, which in many areas limits the role of the traditional postal service.

In the face of a rapidly changing environment, including the intensification of linkages and interdependencies between markets, businesses and customers, and taking into account the scope of marketing tools (including those of communication) used by Polish companies, we can talk about the untapped potential of marketing initiatives. The more so because Poles not only do not support marketing based activities at the appropriate level, they are not even aware of how valuable these tools are. Having an advantage in the intensity of or quality of their marketing communication systems is not seen in terms of competitive advantage (Kopniak 2006). The possibility to compete using marketing skills is also lowly rated (Wysocki 2006). This phenomenon is gaining importance in view of the fact that the majority of Polish companies entering EU markets provide products and services under private brands. In this respect, the choice of brand, name and slogan can be a factor in encouraging foreign consumers to make a purchase.

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dr Sławomir CZARNIEWSKI

University of Finance and Management in Białystok
Ul. Ciepła 40, 15-472 Białystok, Poland
e-mail: s.czarniewski@wp.pl