

## Customer Satisfaction and its Importance for Long-Term Relationships with Service Provider: the Case of Odontology Services

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*Theoretical studies as well as practical evidence validate an opinion that solutions of customer retention and long-term relationships formation and maintenance have a positive effect on results of enterprise activities and play a crucial role in a competitive advantage development.*

*The identification of antecedents of long-term relationships and evaluation of their predictors are becoming priority tasks of a service enterprise. Despite the abundance of scientific research, the identification of variables determining the development of relationships with customers still is a relevant object of scientific discussions.*

*This article emphasizes that customer satisfaction is one of the antecedents of long-term relationships between customer and service provider. Therefore, in consideration of services nature and service provision peculiarities, cognition of factors that influence customer satisfaction becomes relevant for better understanding of customer needs and for the service delivery process improvement.*

*Revealing the diversity of scientific approaches representing satisfaction drivers, it can be underlined that this issue is very important both for theoretical and empirical studies. Referring to a numerous researches on service quality and satisfaction we can maintain, that service quality is the main driver of customer satisfaction with the service provider. Furthermore, it is considered that service quality consists of such quality dimensions that could be named outcome quality, technical quality and functional quality.*

*Considering all above mentioned and that service quality is the main predictor of customer satisfaction, this article aims to determine the relations between satisfaction and intentions to pursue long-term relationships with a service provider.*

*Odontology services are selected for the empirical research. First of all service quality attributes are grouped using a factor analysis into six dimensions (factors). Using these results in this study one method of stated importance and three methods of derived importance were examined for identification of importance of attributes impacting customer satisfaction. Also results of correlation and regression analyses are presented showing relations between satisfaction, its predictors and customer behavioral intentions.*

**Keywords:** *satisfaction, long-term relationships, customer behavioral intentions, service quality, odontology services.*

### Introduction

In the conditions of competitive market environment the creation, maintenance and enhancing long-term customer relationships are treated as a basis for successful performance of any enterprise. It is determined, that an increase in customer retention leads to the increase in enterprise profitability. Thus identification of factors, influencing longevity of customer-service provider relationships becomes a priority task. However, literature analysis on this topic shows, that still there is no consensus regarding identification of those factors and determination of their importance to customer retention. For many years it was thought that service customer satisfaction is the main factor influencing customer repetitive buying behaviour, i.e. customer intentions to return to the same service provider. Notwithstanding, after subsequent researches customer satisfaction and its importance to the long-term relationships with service provider has been treated controversially. It was maintained that satisfaction is not the only one important antecedent of long-term customer relationships and such antecedents as trust, commitment, etc. should be analyzed as well (Berry, Parasuraman, 1991; Ganesan, 1994; Garbarino, Johnson, 1999; Morgan, Hunt, 1994). And what is more, some researches confirmed that in some cases there is no relation between customer satisfaction and customer intentions to repurchase (Dick, Basu, 1994; Hennig- Thurau, Klee, 1997; etc.). Meanwhile the research of other scientists has confirmed the necessity to investigate customer satisfaction as one of the most important antecedent of long-term customer relationships in order to make adequate decisions for customer retention and in the same time for increasing in the activity's results of service provider (Ennew, Binks, 1999; Bolton, 1998; Olsen, Johnson, 2003; Egan, 2001; Garbarino, Johnson, 1999; Mittal, Katrichis and Kumar, 2001 and others). The results of our previous research (see Dovalienė, Gadeikienė and Pilgrimienė, 2007) on customer trust in service provider confirm latter position, and necessitate the research of customer satisfaction in more detail. Moreover the performed literature analysis let us staying that relation between satisfaction and customer behavioral intentions in most cases depends both on the selection of research criteria, measurement techniques (Soderlung, 2006; Chu, 2002) and the specifics of the selected field of the research (Cronin et al., 2000; Mittal, Lassar, 1998). Thus, exploration of customer satisfaction and its importance to long-term customer relationships with service provider

still is a relevant topic for scientific research. Considering the above mentioned problematic aspects, the *problem* of the research is formulated as the following question: What kind of relations exists between service customer satisfaction and the longevity of their relationships with service provider?

**The aim of this paper:** considering service quality as the main predictor of customer satisfaction, to determine the relations between satisfaction and intentions to pursue long-term relationships with a service provider and to test empirically their expression in the case of odontology services.

**Research object:** customer satisfaction with a service provider as an antecedent of long-term relationships.

**Research methods:** systemic and comparative analysis of scientific literature; empirical research employing quantitative survey method.

## Theoretical and empirical background

### Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction with service provider is probably one of the most explored phenomenons in marketing literature. Nevertheless satisfaction is still treated controversially in various scientific researches: starting from its definition and finishing with its importance to long-term customer relationships with service provider.

Literature analysis confirms that service customer satisfaction can be defined from two different perspectives: transactional and relational orientations. In earlier researches satisfaction has been defined from transactional perspective as “the emotional reaction following a disconfirmation experience which acts on the base attitude level and is consumption-specific” (Oliver, 1981). It was used to think that, when customer’s evaluations of service encounter are positive, i.e. when customer is satisfied, he/ she is going to use a company’s services repeatedly. However the emerging relational orientation transformed conception of satisfaction to a construct of overall assessment. Thus referring to Bitner, Hubbert (1994) customer satisfaction could be defined as “the customer overall dis/satisfaction with the organization based on all encounters and experiences with that particular organization”. Hereby the role of single service encounter on customer repurchase intentions in some cases may not be significant. We maintain latter position and in this article satisfaction, determining its importance to long-term customer relationships, is treated as a one-dimensional construct. Such understanding of customer satisfaction makes it possible for service providers to reveal the main factors influencing customer relationships longevity.

An influence of satisfaction on customer’s repetitive behavior has been based in theoretical and empirical studies by Oliver, Burke (1999), Cronin, Brady, Hult (2000), Anderson, Sullivan (1993), Taylor, Baker (1994), Cronin *et al.* (1997), Ennew, Binks (1999), Ostrom, Iacobucci (1995) and others. The importance of satisfaction for the long-term customer relationships has been stressed by Olsen, Johnson (2003), Egan (2001). Satisfaction is treated by most authors as an independent antecedent of

the long-term customer relationships (Garbarino, Johnson, 1999; Egan, 2001; Mittal, Katrichis and Kumar, 2001 and others). However, scientific literature does not provide a single opinion about the influence of satisfaction on longevity of customer relationships. Furthermore, some authors (Dick, Basu, 1994; Hennig- Thurau, Klee, 1997; Bolton, 1998) have proved that the relationship between satisfaction and repurchase behavior is quite complex and diverse: it is not a rule that a customer pursuing long-term relationships with a company is satisfied by the experience; or otherwise, dissatisfaction does not inevitably determine a decision to break relationships. On the other hand there may be plenty of reasons explaining why a satisfied customer does not always come back to the same service provider. Those reasons depend not only on personal or organizational factors, but are context specific too. For example, Cronin *et al.* (2000) performed analysis of satisfaction – customer behavioral relations in six different industries (sports, entertainment, health care, telephone, fast food) and found out that satisfaction had direct influence on behavioral intentions in all industries, except health care. Meanwhile Mittal, Lassar (1998) confirmed that factors driving satisfaction and loyalty differed across two service categories (health care and care repair) examined.

All the abovementioned prove that an analysis of satisfaction, as an antecedent of long-term relationships, remains a relevant object for a scientific research.

### Service quality as a predictor of customer satisfaction

Referring to a numerous researches on service quality and satisfaction (see, e.g., Szymanski, Henard, 2001; Cronin *et al.*, 2000), we can maintain, that service quality is the main driver of customer satisfaction with service provider. However it can be noticed the diversity of results regarding factors influencing service quality and then customer satisfaction. These results mainly depend on the field in which research is carried out and on the selection of research’s criteria.

There could be found various approaches that have been suggested how to define and measure service quality in service marketing literature. Service quality has been viewed as both an overall, holistic evaluation of the service and a summary evaluation of the components of the service (Iacobucci, 1998). Those, who treated service quality as an overall evaluation of service provided (Bolton, Drew, 1991; Cronin, Taylor, 1992), consider it as being similar to an attitude. In such way service quality has been defined as a consumer’s judgment about the excellence or superiority of a service provider’s performance (Cronin, Taylor, 1994; Taylor, Baker, 1994; Teas, 1993). The other group of scientists (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985; Gronroos, 1988; Lethinen and Lethinen 1991; Szmigin, 1993; Anderson, Zwelling, 1996; Mels *et al.*, 1997; Ferguson *et al.*, 1999; Auh, 2005) considers service quality as multidimensional construct. Analyzing works of those authors it could be noticed, that definitions of service quality proposed by various authors are similar to each other and differ mostly in terms, but not in essence. Most of authors have defined

service quality similar like Gronroos (1988), i.e. in terms of *what* customer receive in their interaction with the service providers (i.e., technical quality), and *how* this technical quality is provided to the customers (i.e., functional quality). According to Ferguson et al. (1999) technical aspects of perceived service quality are the physical environment and the basic value that customer receive, whereas functional quality is the process of the service delivery, i.e. relationships between service provider and receiver. These definitions of technical and functional quality are similar to those of Lethinen, Lethinen (1991) physical and interactive quality, also to extrinsic and intrinsic quality of Mels et al. (1997). It could be noticed coherence of above mentioned classification with Auh's (2005) hard attributes (competence, functionality, reliability) and soft attributes (attentiveness/ helpfulness, care, courtesy and friendliness) too. The classification of quality dimensions was expanded by Szmigin (1993), identifying hard quality (what is provided), soft quality (how it is provided) and outcome quality (evaluation of final result of service provided). Her idea later has been elaborated by Gounaris, Venetis (2002): they additionally identified immediate outcome quality and final outcome quality.

Referring to Szmigin (1993) and performed scientific literature analysis it is considered that, beside dimensions of functional and technical service quality, it is purposeful to distinguish the third dimension of service quality – outcome quality – which defines the final quality of the result. Meanwhile, all other quality dimensions seen in various service quality models can be theoretically integrated into technical and functional quality dimensions. Although two latter quality dimensions in one or in another form could be found in various scientific papers, the service attributes, included in those dimensions vary across different researches. For example, Anderson, Zwelling (1996), differently from others, look at the dimension of technical quality in more detail and suggest focusing it on such service attributes, as efficacy, effectiveness, efficiency, and optimality. The literature analysis let us stating, that the final number of service attributes will depend on individual research tasks and on sector specifics.

For an analysis of importance of customer satisfaction to longevity of relationships with service provider, it is necessary to clarify how long-term relationships could be expressed in terms of behavioral intentions.

### **Behavioral intentions as the criteria for measuring relationships longevity**

Determining the importance of any factors for customer long-term relationships with service provider, first of all it is necessary to make a decision, how to measure the longevity of these relationships. Irrespective of the expression of relationship longevity in terms of loyalty or in terms of customer retention, it is necessary to choose appropriate measurement criteria.

It has been proven in various fields (see, e.g., Cronin, Brady and Hult, 2000; White, Schneider, 2000) that research of customer behavioral intentions, seeking to identify various factors which determine customer behavior is

quite effective. In order to reveal the importance of satisfaction to the development of long-term relationships with service customer we draw on the results of Garbarino, Johnson (1999); Gounaris, Venetis (2002). They suggested that satisfaction should be measured by determining its relations with customer's intentions to pursue long-term relationships with a service provider. Literature analysis showed that there might be two different viewpoints to customer behavioral intention: treating it as one-dimensional or multidimensional construct. In this article we use the latter one, referring to Soderlung (2006) research, which confirmed that multidimensional construct, using multi-items scales, is more suitable for measurement of customer relationships longevity.

However treating customer intentions as a multidimensional construct, it could be found in various studies of different authors that components of customer intentions vary depending on the business field, selected for the analysis. The exploration of customer intentions is often concentrated only on customer retention, considering achievement of a repetitive buying behavior as the main purpose. However, customer retention is only one of goals of increasing customer loyalty (Morgan et al., 2000), so customer intentions have to be studied in a broader context. According to Zeithaml et al. (1996), customer intentions favorable for an organization are related to a service provider's ability to make customer say positive things about the organization, recommend it for other customers, purchase its services repetitively and more often. Consequently, besides security of customer repetitive buying behavior that is treated as one of the most important indicators of effectiveness of customer relationship development decisions, other criteria have to be used to define intentions of service customers. Service intangibility, risk faced by a customer in the process of selecting a service provider determine that positive word-of-mouth communication expressed as an intention to recommend a provided service or its provider for others has to be considered as another important component of customer behavioral intentions analysis, when the purpose is to study factors determining longevity of customer relationships.

Identified components of analysis of customer behavioral intentions can be considered as universal, suitable for research of any service customer behavior. Regarding specific research needs and considering the particularity of analyzed services, other components of customer behavioral intentions could be identified, such as involvement into a loyalty program or a club of regular customers, etc.

### **Research design**

The idea of long-term relationships with customer cannot be implemented in a service enterprise if the deep and comprehensive analysis of all potential factors that could be important in retention of customer is not performed. Therefore, with references to revelations that become evident after theoretical studies presented in this article, relations between satisfaction, its predictors (quality dimensions) and future intentions are going to be analyzed in the empirical research.

A case of odontology services has been selected for a deeper analysis of relations between customer satisfaction and his/ her behavioral intentions. Scientific literature provides a big number of odontology service provider-customer interaction studies, but most theoretical and practical researches are oriented to the evaluation of criteria that are relevant for the first-time selection of an odontologist, or the analysis of customer retention opportunities (Gopalakrishna, Mummalaneni, 1993; Wang, Janda, Rao, 1996).

The purpose of the empirical research: after the analysis of customers' opinions to determine whether overall satisfaction with the odontology service provider, influenced by perceived service quality, is important for the longevity of relationships with the service provider.

Pursuing the research purpose and considering the fact that almost all population use odontology services, it has been decided to collect data for the study using a quantitative research method, a questionnaire survey.

Respondents were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction with the service provider (five-point scale: from "very dissatisfied" (1) to "very satisfied" (5)). Future intentions were measured on a five-point scale using two variables: intentions to visit the same odontologist again and intentions to recommend for others.

If we analyze techniques suggested by different scientists for measurement of various attributes importance to customer satisfaction, we can find different approaches. Correlation, regression analyses are used for such kind of researches most often. Or sometimes researchers prefer analyze only respondents' ratings of different attributes' importance to their satisfaction, because the interpretation of such data is easier. But recently, according to Fontenot, Henke, Carson, Carson (2007), many of the suggested techniques emphasize the use of the attributes importance measure along with the measure of performance. The importance of quality attributes to customer satisfaction was measured using both stated and derived importance techniques in this article. Chu (2002) use the Hanson's (1992) suggested definition, which defines that a stated importance approach requires the respondents to state their perception of the importance of each attribute, which is going to be measured for the customer satisfaction study (in this article all attributes are oriented to measure the importance of quality dimensions to customer satisfaction). Meanwhile derived importance can be measured using various techniques, but to Fontenot et al. (2007) approach, correlation and regression analyses are the most commonly used tools in deriving importance.

Table 1

Factor structure and statistical indicators

Attributes	Factor loading			Attributes	Factor loading		
	Technical quality				Functional quality		
	F1	F2	F3		F4	F5	F6
<b>Reliability and competence (F1)</b>				<b>Customization (F4)</b>			
Works in the same place for a long time	0.74			Clearly presents available treatment alternatives	0.83		
Is experienced	0.71			Explains treatment possibilities and allows to choose	0.77		
Has many customers	0.65			Explains what and how everything is going to be performed	0.77		
Is an expert in his field	0.57			Considers my needs	0.75		
Is reliable	0.50			Foresees problems and possible solutions	0.66		
Is innovative	0.39			Is attentive	0.61		
				Reminds when a prophylactic examination is needed	0.59		
				Always treats without waiting if a tooth-ache occurs	0.42		
<b>Tangibility (F2)</b>				<b>Empathy, politeness and desirability (F5)</b>			
Uses only latest teeth treatment technologies		0.87		Is friendly		0.80	
Uses only best medical substances		0.69		Communicates decently		0.76	
Uses ordered and disinfected instruments		0.56		Respects me		0.69	
				Is polite		0.69	
				Is obliging		0.63	
				Works in a nice and tidy room		0.60	
				Is dressed neatly and appropriately		0.52	
				Communicates pleasantly		0.50	
<b>Promptness (F3)</b>				<b>Similarity and fairness (F6)</b>			
Is punctual			0.81	Follows the same values as I do			0.81
Always takes at the predetermined time			0.78	Is fair			0.59
				Keeps agreements			0.56
				Is similar to me in some sense			0.55
<b>Cronbach-alfa</b>	0.85	0.82	0.94	<b>Cronbach-alfa</b>	0.91	0.92	0.79

Therefore, the main part of the provided questionnaire consisted of the list of attributes for the quality measurement which was composed according to researches performed by Coulter, Coulter (2002), Auh (2005), Gounaris, Venetis (2002). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each attribute for the selection of an odontologist and to rate their experience of the odontologist's performance.

Responses were received from 201 respondents, but only 177 questionnaires were recognized as suitable for further processing. The research has been conducted in February 2007. Statistical data analysis has been performed using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS 15.0 and based on a specialized literature (McDaniel, Gates, 2007; Pukėnas, 2005; Čekanavičius, Murauskas, 2002).

### Research results and interpretation

Research results are presented in the following order: at first, service quality attributes are grouped using a factor analysis and their statistical significance is evaluated, then stated and derived importance of each factor for satisfaction is analyzed and results of correlation and regression analyses are presented showing relations between satisfaction, factors influencing it and customer behavioral intentions.

Principal component factor analysis with VARIMAX rotation is first used to identify dimensions of the 34 quality attributes. The main aim of running a factor analysis is to create a smaller set of correlated attributes into dimensions, or factors, which explain the most variances among the attributes. Table 1 shows the results of six quality dimensions derived from the factor analysis labeled as "Reliability and competence" (F1), "Tangibility" (F2), "Promptness" (F3), "Customization" (F4), "Empathy, politeness and desirability" (F5), "Similarity and fairness" (F6). Results explain 73,32 percent of variable dispersion. A Bartlett sphericity criteria  $p$ -value is obtained,  $p < \alpha$  ( $\alpha = 0,05$  is a significance level), i.e., variables are not independent, and  $KMO = 0,825$ , so it can be stated that the data set is relevant for factor analysis, results of which are presented in the Table 1 (Varimax rotation, 27 iterations). Statistical validity of integration of identified dimensions into factors is tested based on Cronbach-alfa values of the internal consistence indicator. Cronbach-alfa values approach one (1), consequently, we can say that factors are meaningful.

Average ratings of the respondents for each quality dimension are treated as stated importance. Fontenot et al. (2007) suggested three techniques for the derived importance measurement is used in this research: (1) correlation coefficients between performance ratings for each factor and respondents' ratings of overall satisfaction, (2) beta weights from regression analysis in which the performance ratings for each quality dimension were used as predictors in a regression model where overall satisfaction was the criterion variable and (3) the multiplication of correlation coefficients and beta weights to obtain a combined importance scores.

The importance scores for both stated and derived importance are presented in the table 2.

Stated and derived importance

	Stated importance	Derived importance		
		Correlation Coef*	Regression beta weight	Corr* beta weight
F1	4.055	0.267	0.130	0.035
F2	4.215	0.194	-0.158	-0.031
F3	3.878	0.450	0.432	0.194
F4	3.939	0.334	0.187	0.062
F5	4.197	0.161	-0.163	-0.026
F6	3.517	0.233	0.038	0.009

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure graphically presents the ranks of stated and derived importance. Here rank "6" is given to the factor that has the highest importance score and "1" for that which has the lowest score.

From the visualization presented in the Figure the divergence of results between stated and derived techniques as well as promiscuity among three derived techniques become evident. Fontenot et al. (2007) found out that such situation makes difficult the analysis, interpretations and generalizations of the results. They state, that measures of derived importance are more sensitive than the scale-based measures of stated importance.

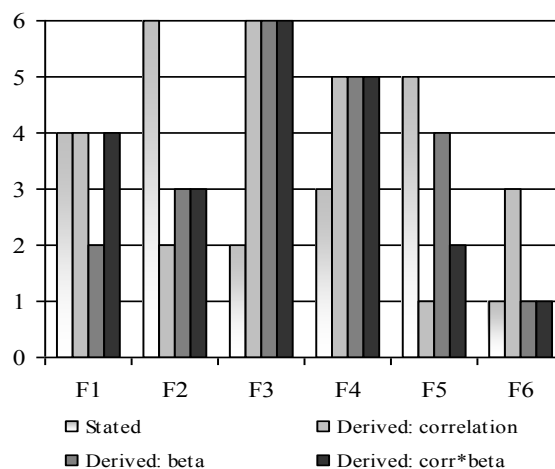


Figure. Ranked stated and derived importance

One solution for the compatibility of the results is suggested by Fontenot et al. (2007): to integrate both stated and derived importance rankings and to use the Kano, Seraku, Takahashi, Tsuji (1984) framework for accomplishing this:

- Attributes identified as important in both stated and derived importance measures (for example, reliability and competence) have to be considered as priority quality dimension for managerial solutions because their presence can promote satisfaction, meanwhile their absence may result customer dissatisfaction with the odontologist.
- Those attributes which ranks for both techniques are lower (for example, similarity and fairness)

should not be treated as the highest importance as these may be attributes that are unexpected, unnecessary or not contributory to overall satisfaction.

- Attributes identified as highly important using stated importance technique and low in derived importance (for example, tangibility) have to be considered as the potential reasons for customer dissatisfaction: their presence will not make customer more satisfied, but their absence surely will cause customer dissatisfaction and future intentions.
- Attributes higher ranked in derived importance and lower in stated (for example, promptness) are possible “delighters”: customers usually do not expect them, but their absence will positively influence their overall satisfaction with the service provider.

After the comparison of stated and derived importance techniques and considering the theoretical background, presented in the article, it was decided to consolidate six factors into two underlying service quality groups: technical quality (what?) and functional quality (how?). Authors of the article suppose that relatively “reliability and competence” (F1), “tangibility” (F2), “promptness” (F3) can be attributed to technical quality of odontology services, and “customization” (F4), “empathy, politeness and desirability” (F5), “similarity and fairness” (F6) can be considered as constituent dimensions of functional quality.

In order to ascertain what quality dimension(s) has the strongest influence on customer satisfaction with the odontologist it has been decided to test an adequacy of the multiple regression model and to determine if there is a linear relation between satisfaction (dependant variable) and quality dimensions (independent variables): technical, functional and outcome qualities.

The obtained model *R-square value* is 0.562 ( $F = 50.6$ ;  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ), and this means that model fits and 56.2 percent of dispersion around the mean value can be explained by a linear regression (Table 3).

Table 3

**Results of multiple regression model**

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Stand. Coeff.	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	1.207	0.304		0.000
Outcome quality	0.554	0.052	0.612	0.000
Technical quality	0.261	0.105	0.237	0.014
Functional quality	-0.041	0.106	-0.038	0.698

In the second column of the table 3 coefficients of the estimated regression model are proposed. In the last column *p-value* of the statistics which tests the hypotheses about coefficients  $b_j$  equality to zero is presented. The hypothesis is accepted for the coefficient of independent variable functional quality ( $b = -0.041$ ,  $p\text{-value} > 0.05$ ).

So it can be stated that customer satisfaction with the odontology service provider dependence from functional quality is not linear or is not significant. Other two independents – outcome and technical quality – have influence on overall satisfaction of the customer.

Beta coefficients show that strongest influence to customer satisfaction with the odontologist has outcome quality ( $\beta = 0.612$ ).

Theoretical studies show that strong relations between satisfaction and customer future intentions exist. And these relations are of very high importance for the long-term relationship formation between customer and service provider. In the empirical research presented in this article future intentions are determined as intentions to visit the same odontologist again and intentions to recommend the visited odontologist. Thus the table 4 shows that there are

Table 4

**Matrix of correlations between satisfaction and behavioral intentions**

	1.	2.	3.
Correlation Coefficient	1	<b>0.642 **</b>	<b>0.335 **</b>
Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000

\*\* *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

1. Overall satisfaction with services of the visited odontologist
2. Intentions to visit the same odontologist again
3. Intentions to recommend the visited odontologist strong and statistically significant relations between satisfaction and intentions to return ( $r = 0.642$ ,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ) and significant, but not so strong, relations between satisfaction with the provided odontology services and intentions to recommend the odontologist for others ( $r = 0.335$ ,  $p\text{-value} < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusions**

According to the results of theoretical research of customer satisfaction and its importance for long-term relationships with service provider, it could be maintained that:

- Despite the controversial treatment of customer satisfaction, it remains one of the most important factors, influencing longevity of customer relationships with service provider; and because its importance to customer behavioral intentions depends on the specifics of the field analyzed, it shouldn't be excluded from the research in advance.
- Considering long-term relationships development, customer satisfaction should be treated as construct of overall assessment, influenced by service quality. Meanwhile the literature analysis confirmed that it is purposeful to distinguish three dimensions of service quality, when measuring its influence on customer satisfaction, i.e., the outcome quality, technical quality and functional quality.
- The literature analysis allows to state that even the

components of customer behavioral intentions, are context specific, two universal (suitable for any service) components for measurement of customer intentions might be distinguished: 1) intentions to use services repeatedly, and 2) intentions to recommend the service.

After the analysis of customers' opinion, seeking to determine whether overall satisfaction with the odontologist, influenced by service quality, is important for long-term relationships with the odontology service provider, it has been determined that:

- Factorizing results of quality attributes, six factors have been identified: "Reliability and competence" (F1), "Tangibility" (F2), "Promptness" (F3), "Customization" (F4), "Empathy, politeness and desirability" (F5), "Similarity and fairness" (F6). Relatively F1, F2, F3 can be attributed to technical quality of odontology services, and F4, F5, F6 can be considered as constituent dimensions of functional quality.
- Analyzing the main quality dimensions that have the strongest impact on customer satisfaction with the odontologist, stated and derived importance measurement techniques and multiple regression model was used. The results show that "reliability and competence" has to be considered as a quality dimension of a prior importance for managerial solutions, "tangibility" is a potential reason for customer dissatisfaction, and that by developing the dimension "promptness" it is possible to "delight" customers and increase their satisfaction. Besides, the multiple regression model shows that satisfaction can be predicted with the 56.2 percent reliability using outcome quality and technical quality dimensions. Outcome quality is the dimension that has the strongest impact on the overall customer satisfaction with the performance of the odontologist.
- Correlation analysis showed that strong and statistically significant relations between satisfaction and behavioral intentions exist. Stronger relations between satisfaction and intentions to visit the same odontologist were identified. Though positive word-of-mouth also has to be taken into account.

Summarizing, it could be maintained, that satisfaction can be considered as the antecedent of long-term relationships between a customer and a service provider. Therefore, cognition of factors that influence satisfaction becomes crucial for the solutions of customer retention.

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### Vartotojų pasitenkinimas ir jo svarba santykių su paslaugų teikėju ilgalaikiškumui: odontologų paslaugų atvejis

Santrauka

Konkurencinės rinkos sąlygomis ilgalaikių santykių su vartotojais kūrimas, palaikymas ir stiprinimas suprantamas kaip bet kurios įmonės sėkmingos veiklos pagrindas. Nustatyta, kad, padidėjus vartotojų išlaikymui, didėja įmonės pelningumas. Taigi veiksniai, lemiančią vartotojų santykių su įmone ilgalaikiškumą, išaiškinimas tampa prioritetiniu tikslu. Tačiau mokslinės literatūros šia tema analizė leidžia teigti, kad iki šiol nėra pasiekto konsensuso dėl šių veiksnių išskyrimo ir jų svarbos vartotojų išlaikymui. Ilgą laiką manyta, kad paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimas yra pagrindinis veiksnys, skatinantis vartotojų pakartotinai naudotis to paties paslaugų teikėjo paslaugomis. Vis dėlto vėlesnių tyrimų rezultatų analizė parodė, kad pasitenkinimas ir jo svarba santykių ilgalaikiškumui traktuojami kontroversiškai. Buvo tvirtinama, kad pasitenkinimas nėra pagrindinis santykių ilgalaikiškumą lemiantis veiksnys. Maža to, kai kurie tyrėjai nustatė, kad nėra ryšio tarp pasitenkinimo ir paslaugų vartotojų ketinimų. Tuo tarpu kitų autorių atlikti tyrimai patvirtindavo pasitenkinimo kaip vieno svarbiausių santykių ilgalaikiškumo antecedentų tyrimo svarbą, siekiant išlaikyti vartotojus, o kartu ir padidinti įmonės pelną. Be to, atlikta analizė leidžia teigti, kad vartotojų pasitenkinimo ir ketinimų sąsajų tyrimo rezultatai labai priklauso tiek nuo tyrimo kriterijų pasirinkimo, tiek nuo pasirinktos tyrimo srities specifikos. Taigi paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimo svarbos santykių su paslaugų teikėju ilgalaikiškumui išaiškinimas tebėra aktualus mokslinių tyrimų objektas. Atsižvelgiant į aukščiau įvardytus probleminius aspektus, tyrimo problema formuluojama šiuo klausimu: Kokios yra sąsajos tarp paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimo ir jų santykių su paslaugų teikėju ilgalaikiškumo?

**Tikslas:** nustatyti sąsajas tarp vartotojų pasitenkinimo, veikiamo svokiamos paslaugų kokybės, ir jų ketinimų palaikyti ilgalaikius santykius su paslaugų teikėju bei empiriškai patikrinti jų raišką odontologų paslaugų pavyzdžiu.

**Tyrimo objektas:** vartotojo pasitenkinimas paslaugų teikėju kaip ilgalaikių santykių kūrimo antecedentas.

**Tyrimo metodai:** sisteminė ir lyginamoji mokslinės literatūros analizė; kiekybinis tyrimo metodas – apklausa.

Pirma straipsnio dalis skirta vartotojų pasitenkinimo, kaip vieno iš pagrindinių santykių ilgalaikiškumą lemiančių veiksnių; paslaugos kokybės, kaip pagrindinio vartotojų pasitenkinimo antecedento bei vartotojų ketinimo konstrukto, analizei. Nepaisant to, kad vartotojų pasitenkinimas yra vienas iš plačiausiai marketingo literatūroje išnagrinėtų konstrukto, mokslinėje literatūroje jis ir jo svarba santykių su vartotojais ilgalaikiškumui vis dar traktuojamas nevienareikšmiškai.

Išnagrinėjus, susisteminius ir apibendrinus įvairius požiūrius į paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimą ir jo svarbą ilgalaikių santykių su paslaugų teikėju plėtojei, vartotojų pasitenkinimas šiame straipsnyje apibrėžtas kaip vienos dimensijos konstruktas, skirtas įvertinti bendram pasitenkinimui paslaugos teikėju, o ne pavienio kontakto vertinimui. Toks vartotojų pasitenkinimo traktavimas suteikia galimybę paslaugų teikėjams išsiaiškinti veiksnius, lemiančius santykių su vartotojais ilgalaikiškumą. Vis dėlto iki šių dienų nėra pasiekta konsensusas dėl pasitenkinimo svarbos santykių su vartotojais ilgalaikiškumui įvertinimo. Taigi pasitenkinimo kaip santykių su vartotojais ilgalaikiškumo antecedentų analizė išlieka aktualus mokslinių diskusijų objektas.

Kaip parodė mokslinės literatūros analizė, paslaugų kokybė yra pagrindinis veiksnys, lemiantis vartotojų pasitenkinimą suteiktomis paslaugomis. Nagrinėjant įvairių autorių pateikiamus apibrėžimus, matyti, kad paslaugų kokybė gali būti traktuojama kaip bendras, holistinis paslaugos vertinimas ir kaip atskirų paslaugos komponentų įvertinimų suma. Autoriai, nagrinėjantys paslaugų kokybę kaip bendrą paslaugos įvertinimą, prilygina ją požiūriui į paslaugą. Tuo tarpu kita grupė autorių paslaugų kokybę traktuoja kaip multidimensinį konstrukto. Atlikus pastarosios grupės autorių darbų analizę, galima teigti, kad skirtingų autorių pateikiami paslaugų kokybės apibrėžimai yra panašūs: daugiausia skiriasi terminais, o ne esme. Atlikta įvairių autorių pateikiamų paslaugų kokybės dimensijų analizė leidžia teigti, kad siekiant tinkamai nusakyti veiksnius, lemiančius paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimą, tikslinga išskirti šias pagrindines paslaugų kokybės dimensijas: galutinio rezultato kokybę, techninę kokybę ir funkcinę kokybę. Galutinis paslaugos atributų, kurie sujungiami į identi-

fikuotas paslaugų kokybės dimensijas, skaičius priklauso nuo individualių tyrėjo tikslų bei nuo tyrimo srities specifikos.

Atlikta literatūros analizė parodė, kad vartotojų pasitenkinimo svarba santykių ilgalaikiškumui gali būti išaiškinta nustatant jo ryšį su vartotojo ketinimais palaikyti šiuos santykius. Atsižvelgiant į tai, kad vartotojo ketinimai gali būti traktuojami kaip vienos dimensijos arba kaip daugiadimensis konstruktas, straipsnyje pirmumas teikiamas antrajam, įvertinant pastaraisiais metais atliktus mokslinius tyrimus, kurie pagrindžia būtinybę šiuose tyrimuose naudoti daugiaelementę skalę. Tačiau šios skalės elementai varijuoja priklausomai nuo tyrimo konteksto. Taigi galima teigti, kad išskirti du vartotojų ketinimų kintamieji: vartotojų ketinimai pakartotinai naudotis paslaugomis ir ketinimai rekomenduoti gali būti traktuojami kaip universalūs, tinkami bet kurios srities veiksnių, lemiančių santykių ilgalaikiškumą, tyrimams.

Ilgalaikių santykių su vartotoju idėjos paslaugų įmonėje neįmanoma įgyvendinti, neatlikus išsamių visų potencialių veiksnių, kurie galėtų būti svarbūs vartotojams išlaikyti, analizės. Todėl, atsižvelgus į straipsnyje pateiktą teorinių studijų rezultatus bei odontologijos paslaugų atvejį pasirinkus gilesnei analizei, sąsajos tarp pasitenkinimo, jį veikiančių veiksnių (kokybės dimensijų) ir ateities ketinimų yra analizuojamos empiriniame tyrime.

Siekiant tyrimo tikslo bei atsižvelgiant į tai, kad odontologijos paslaugomis naudojasi faktiškai visi žmonės, nuspręsta tyrimui pasirinkti kiekybinį tyrimo metodą – anketinę apklausą. Užpildytos anketos gautos iš 201 adresatų, tačiau galiojančiomis pripažintos 177.

Atlikus faktorių kokybės atributų analizę, jie sugrupuoti į šešis faktorius – kokybės dimensijas: „patikimumas ir kompetencija“ (F1), „apčiuopiamumas“ (F2), „tikslumas“ (F3), „pritaikymas individualiems poreikiams“ (F4), „empatija, mandagumas, patrauklumas“ (F5), „panašumas ir teisingumas“ (F6).

Nagrinėjant kiekvieno faktoriaus svarbą vartotojų pasitenkinimui odontologo teikiamomis paslaugomis, pasirenkamos „konstatuotos svarbos“ ir „apskaičiuotos svarbos“ metodologijos. „Konstatuotos svarbos“ analizei naudojama viena mokslininkų siūloma technika: kiekvienai kokybės dimensijai vertinimas atliekamas apskaičiuojant faktoriaus atributų vidurkį. Tuo tarpu „apskaičiuotos svarbos“ įverčiai skaičiuojami pasitelkus tris įvairių autorių siūlomus algoritmus: (1) koreliacijos koeficientą tarp pasitenkinimo ir kiekvienos kokybės dimensijos, (2) taikant daugialypės regresijos modelį, kai priklausomas kintamasis yra bendras vartotojų pasitenkinimas, nepriklausomi kintamieji – kokybės dimensijos, gaunant beta įverčius, (3) koreliacijos koeficiento ir beta įverčio sandaugą.

Lyginant apskaičiuotas „konstatuotą svarbą“ ir „apskaičiuotą svarbą“, įžvelgiama ryški rezultatų sklaida, be to, prieštarai gali būti vertinami pagal skirtingus metodus „apskaičiuotos svarbos“

įverčiai. Todėl, remiantis įvairių autorių nuostatomis, gali būti padarytos tokios rezultatus apibendrinančios išvados:

- „Patikimumo ir kompetencijos“ dimensijai priskirti atributai, įvertinti kaip svarbūs tiek „konstatuotos svarbos“, tiek „apskaičiuotos svarbos“ atvejais, turi būti laikomi prioritetingais svarbos atributais įmonėje, kadangi jų buvimas didina vartotojų pasitenkinimą, o nebuvimas – mažina.
- „Panašumo ir teisingumo“ dimensijos atributai, kurių rangai abiem kategorijoms yra palyginti žemi, neturėtų būti laikomi kaip labai svarbūs tenkinant odontologijos paslaugų vartotojų poreikius.
- Kadangi „apčiuopiamumo“ dimensijos atributai respondentų vertinami kaip labai svarbūs („konstatuota svarba“), bet yra žemi „apskaičiuotos svarbos“ vertinimai, jie turėtų būti laikomi kaip potencialūs vartotojo nepasitenkinimą didinantys veiksniai: jų buvimas nedaro įtakos vartotojų pasitenkinimui, o nebuvimas neabejotinai didina nepasitenkinimą.
- Atributai, aukštai vertinami „apskaičiuotos svarbos“ atveju ir žemai – „konstatuotos svarbos“, yra tie, kurių vartotojas nesitiki ir kuriais naudojantis galima vartotoją priversti žavėtis paslauga teikėju ir didinti pasitenkinimą teikiamomis paslaugomis.

Siekiant išsiaiškinti, kokios (ios) kokybės dimensija (os) labiausiai veikia pasitenkinimą, ir atsižvelgiant į teorinių studijų rezultatus, nuspręsta kokybės dimensijas F1, F2, F3 sąlygiškai priskirti techninei kokybei, o F4, F5, F6 – funkcinai. Be to, į analizę įtraukiama ir galutinio rezultato kokybė. Panaudojus daugialypės regresijos modelį, tampa aišku, kad 56,2 proc. sklaidos apie vidurkį gali būti paaiškinta tiesine pasitenkinimo priklausomybe nuo galutinio rezultato kokybės ir techninės kokybės. Be to, galutinio rezultato kokybė gali būti traktuojama kaip stipriai veikianti odontologijos paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimą.

Analizuojant odontologijos paslaugų vartotojų pasitenkinimo ir ateities ketinimų sąsajas, nustatyta, kad statistiškai reikšmingas ir stiprus ryšys egzistuoja tarp pasitenkinimo ir ketinimų pakartotinai pasinaudoti to paties odontologo paslaugomis, statistiškai reikšmingas, bet silpnas ryšys – tarp pasitenkinimo ir ketinimų rekomenduoti aplankytą odontologą kitiems.

Apibendrinant teorinių bei empirinių tyrimų rezultatus, galima teigti, kad vartotojų pasitenkinimas traktuotinas kaip ilgalaikių santykių tarp vartotojo ir paslaugų teikėjo antecedentas. Todėl veiksnių, darančių įtaką pasitenkinimui, išskyrimas ir pažinimas tampa neatsiejama vartotojų išlaikymo sprendimų dalimi.

Raktažodžiai: *pasitenkinimas, ilgalaikiai santykiai, vartotojų ketinimai, paslaugų kokybė, odontologų paslaugos.*

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