

ETHICAL EVALUATION OF MARKETING ACTIONS ACCORDING TO THE CONSUMERS

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Abstract

Ethics is one of significant and at the same time indispensable aspects of operations by contemporary organisations. It should constitute the benchmark for the direction of actions both inside the organisation and within its external relations. The evaluation of marketing actions, addressed first of all to consumers, should facilitate the resolution of decision-related problems as well as prevent their arising.

The research was aimed at recognising the respondents' opinion on the contemporary marketing practice towards the customer.

Based on the applied dependency method and primary data the respondents' opinion on the contemporary practice of marketing towards the customer is presented in the article. The research results confirm the thesis that the ethical behaviour is beneficial for companies since the consumers choose products offered by the companies being in compliance with the principles of ethics and values recognized by the purchaser.

One should remember that the ethical behaviour does not simply consist in avoidance of evil acts. The marketing specialist following the ethical code of conduct recognises that the position held by him/ her in the society also signifies certain commitments.

Key words: consumer attitude, ethics, marketing.

Introduction

The enterprises more and more frequently realise the necessity of bearing the responsibility for actions taken. The corporate social responsibility and ethical conducts involves the obligation of introducing social criteria to the process of taking strategic decisions and their implementation, guaranteeing the balance between the widely understood benefits of the external and internal environment and the own interest of corporate units.

The business code of conduct, applied in practice, is frequently criticised since companies on an ongoing basis face the situations that give rise to serious ethical dilemmas. One may quote again the classical questions raised by Howard R. Bowen, concerning the entrepreneur's activity (Kotler, 2004, p. 39):

- *Should he/she run sales in the manner violating the consumer's privacy?*
- *Should he/she apply the methods involving noisy advertising, lotteries, awards and other instruments which are at least doubtful in terms of good taste?*
- *Should he/she apply the tactics of strong pressure in order to encourage people to purchase?*
- *Should he/she accelerate the aging of products by the endless introduction of new models and designs?*
- *Should he/she pursue the motives of materialism, unlimited consumption, "keeping up with the Jones" as well as strive after their consolidation?*

The ethical principles of business and marketing pertain both to the organisation's ambient and internal environment. The following are characteristics of significance for external relations: honesty in promotional campaigns, veracity in advertising messages, offering safe and proven products, putting a stop to consumer manipulation, care for the environment, elimination of aggressive and dishonest competition.

With regard to the organisation's interior, in order to ensure the ethical code of conduct one should: apply the same criteria for promotion and employee evaluation (without nepotism or other schemes), guarantee the properly and timely remuneration for work performed, prevent the harm to underlings, co-workers and superiors as well, respect one another, eliminate corruption.

Orientation towards the profit limitation is necessary in these cases when the efforts aimed at its maximisation may result in actions inconsistent with the principles of ethics and breaching the rule of the corporate social responsibility.

In order to recognise the consumers' opinions on the contemporary marketing practice covering the aforementioned scopes, the questionnaire survey was held.

Research Enquiry

The analyses and assessments were made based on opinions of survey participants. The following research questions were analysed and solved within detailed discussion:

- *What is the impact of the ethical principles observance by a company on the customers' behaviour and attitude?*
- *Which notions are connected with the category of ethics in business according to the respondents?*
- *Is there a connection between the employee treatment by a company and its ethical character?*
- *Do the ethical structures and procedures within an organisation to provide an opportunity for limiting and eliminating of unethical actions?*
- *What is the significance of ethical codes within an organisation according to the respondents?*
- *How do the respondents assess the corporate marketing actions run towards the customer?*
- *In which marketing areas do the respondents identify the corporate unethical actions?*
- *What kind of unethical marketing actions have the respondents encountered?*
- *How do the consumers define/ determine the contemporary marketing?*

Methodology of Research

Stages of the Research Organisation

The analysis is based on the research planned and held by the author. The survey covered the following periods:

- November – December 2012 - development of the project assumptions, preparation of a measuring instrument, opening a Google account, drafting a form;
- December 2012, January - February 2013 – data accumulation (duration of **audit** - rium survey: 15.12.2012 – 31.01.2013; duration of electronic survey: 05.01.2013 - 24.02.2013);
- March - April 2013 – creation of a database, determination of the variables correlation dimension;

- April - June 2013 – analysis of dependencies, formulation of implications and conclusions.

Instrument and Procedures

The survey based on the Internet questionnaire (in Google, also with use of other tools rendered available by Google in the scope of review and processing of data provided by respondents by filling in the questionnaire) and the auditorium questionnaire held in the śląskie province. In case of the Internet questionnaire, an invitation to participate in the survey was placed on the social networking service Facebook.com, with a link to the e-questionnaire: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dENxRVVDY3NsQk9RZDJmcXpZakVmanc6MQ>, which was also forwarded to the respondents' email addresses.

The questionnaire comprised ten questions: 7 closed questions also based on a level-headed scale, two half-open ones and a single open-ended question. The demographics included gender, age and education.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

The study based on the *convenience sampling method*. Convenience samples are referred to as accidental samples since their individual components are included in the sample "by accident". In case of convenient samples it is difficult to discuss their representativeness. However, this type of research characterizes a certain fragment of the reality and consumers' opinions, which are symptomatic for the assessment of consumers and may be used for cognitive projects (Churchill, 2002, pp. 497-499).

100 respondents took part in the survey: 54 women and 46 men. Because of the small sample, the study conclusions should not be generalized, whereas the study itself should be regarded as a pilot one.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed based on the results of primary research. The replies obtained from respondents were streamlined according to categories, also with consideration of social and demographic characteristics.

The group of respondents aged 18-24 was the most numerous one (41%), followed by respondents aged 25-34 (30%), while 16% of them indicated the age range of 35-44. The respondents aged 45-54 constituted 11% of the entire group. Only one person participated from the following age groups (each): 55-64 and over 64.

Mostly people with secondary education (65%) and university degree (31%) participated in the survey.

The basic statistical analysis enabled summing up of data in the forms of tables and charts.

Results of Research

In the questionnaire, the introductory question asked the respondents to choose three out of the group of indicated terms, which were closely connected to the category of ethics.

The respondents could choose from among: *decency, responsibility, compliance, candour, fairness, honesty, morality*. The question also allowed for indicating a term outside those listed in the questionnaire, which according to the respondent was connected with the category of ethics.

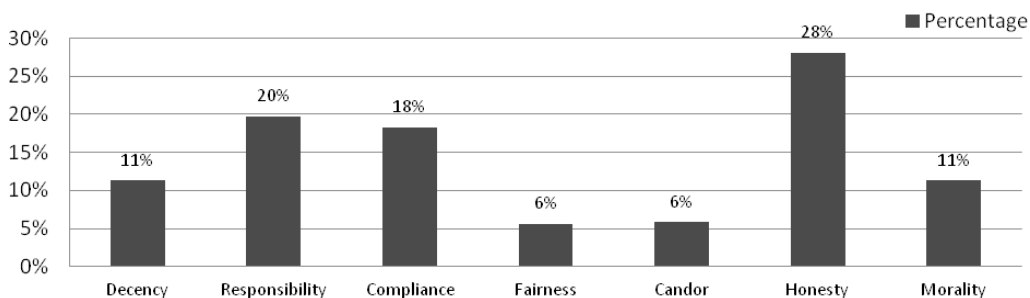


Figure 1: Terms connected with the business ethics category – according to the respondents [% of indications].

The respondents most frequently indicated *honesty* – 28% of all the replies, *responsibility* – 20% and *compliance* – 18%. Morality and decency obtained 11% each. Figure 1 presents the respondents’ replies. The listed categories strictly involve the principles of moral conduct and law observance. The consumers wish to feel safe in market relations, want to be treated in a fair manner, which shall be ensured for them by the market entities’ compliance with binding legal regulations.

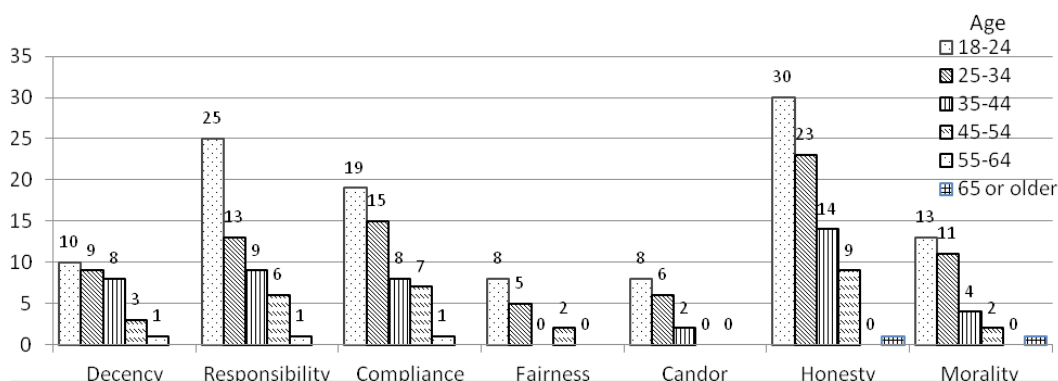


Figure 1.1: Terms connected with the business ethics category - the respondents’ replies in co-relation with their age.

Figure 1.1 presents the indications of terms connected with ethics in the aspect of the respondents’ age. As illustrated by the presented dependencies, the terms *honesty* was chosen most frequently regardless of the respondents’ age. The respondents aged 25-34 indicated the following categories: 23 responses for *honesty*, 15 indications for *compliance*, while 13 for *responsibility*. In comparison with the younger respondents (18-25 years), one may discern a differentiation in the number of indications for the features holding the second and third position. The youngest respondents chose the categories in the following manner: *honesty* (30 indications), *responsibility* (25 indications) and *compliance* (19 indications). Similarly, in the age group of 35-44, the following responses were recorded: *honesty* (14), *responsibility* (9) as well as *compliance* (8) and *decency* (8). The respondents aged 45-54 selected the following terms: *honesty* – 9 indications, *compliance* – 7 indications, *responsibility* – 6 indications.

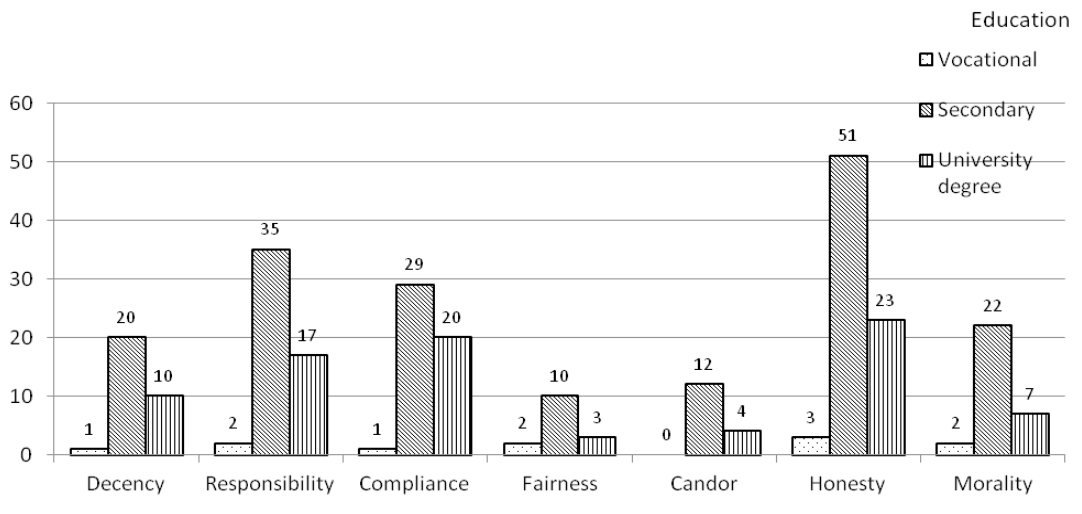


Figure 1.2: Terms connected with the business ethics category – the respondents’ replies in co-relation with their education.

Education was of no impact on the indication of the dominant feature, i.e. *honesty* as the category strictly connected with ethics. The respondents with university degree selected the following: *compliance* – 20 indications and *responsibility* – 17 indications; while the respondents with secondary education chose *responsibility* 35 times, and *compliance* – 29. These interdependencies are presented in Figure 1.2.

The second question combined the issue of employee treatment by a company and its ethical character. Almost all the respondents were of the opinion that company’s ethical character is manifested in the manner of employee treatment (Figure 2). Neither gender nor age differentiate opinions in that regard.

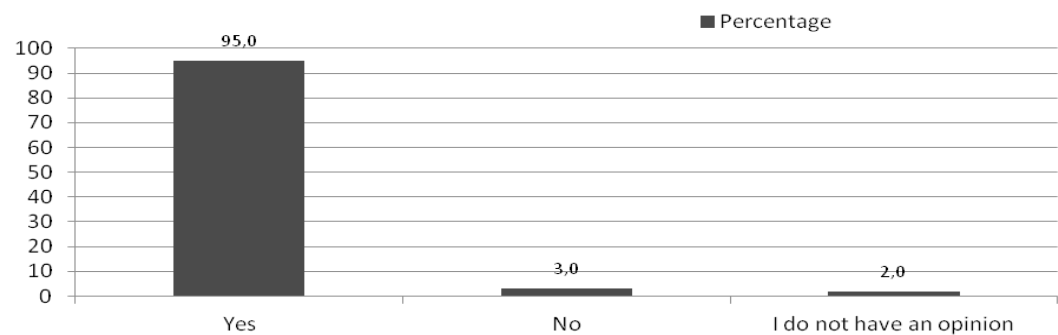


Figure 2: Employee treatment by a company versus its ethical character according to the respondents.

The survey was also aimed at search for the respondents’ opinion to the following question: *Does the introduction of structures and procedures for ethical performance assessment (e.g. in the corporate codes of ethics) provide an opportunity for limiting and eliminating unethical actions?*

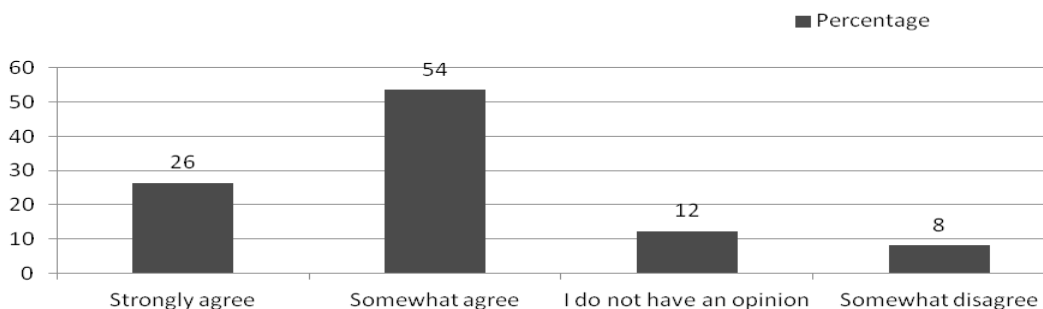


Figure 3: Existence of ethical structures and procedures as an opportunity for limiting and eliminating of unethical actions according to the respondents.

80% of the respondents indicated the structures and procedures for the ethical evaluation of behaviour and actions as an opportunity for limiting and eliminating of unethical acts. 20% of the respondents did not have an opinion in that respect or selected the reply “Somewhat disagree”. The organisational solutions constitute regulations and set the transparent procedures of conduct and evaluation, while their significance is appreciated by the respondents (see Figure 3).

The respondents were also asked to indicate maximum three replies within the questionnaire, consistent with their opinion. The survey participants could choose among the following:

- Marketing codes of ethics support corporate responsibility.
- The role of marketing codes of ethics is overrated; in reality, their value is rather minor.
- The marketing codes of ethics protect consumers against unethical actions of the companies.
- The marketing codes of ethics are effective when accompanied by ethics training.
- I do not have an opinion.

Figure 4 presents the results.

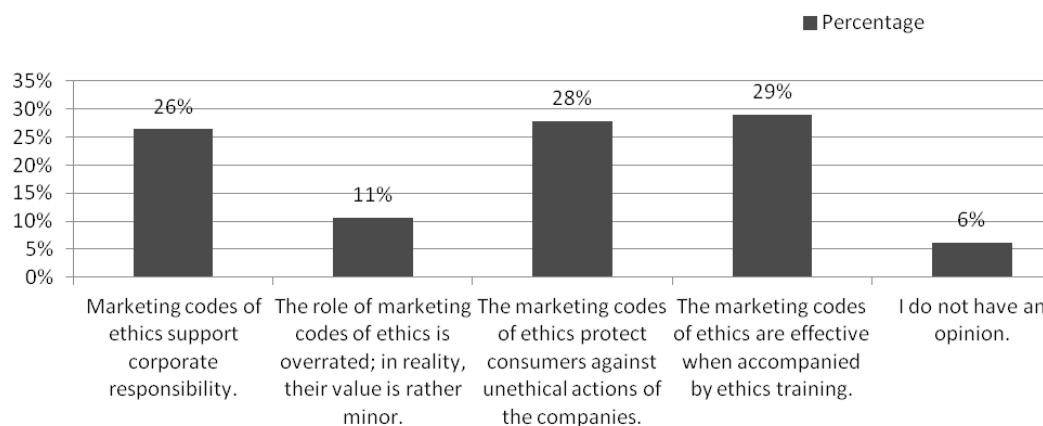


Figure 4: Significance of ethical codes in an organisation according to the respondents.

The respondents strongly appreciated the existence and role of the ethical codes which protected the consumer (28% of indications), but simultaneously noticed the importance of training that should accompany them (29% of indications). 11 of the respondents were of the opinion that the marketing ethical codes were overestimated in terms of the role assigned to them, while in reality they were of minor significance.

Men to the largest extent appreciated the significance of training but also more frequently (14 indications) than women (7 indications) were of the opinion that the role of ethical codes was overestimated since in reality they were of minor significance (see Figure 4.1).

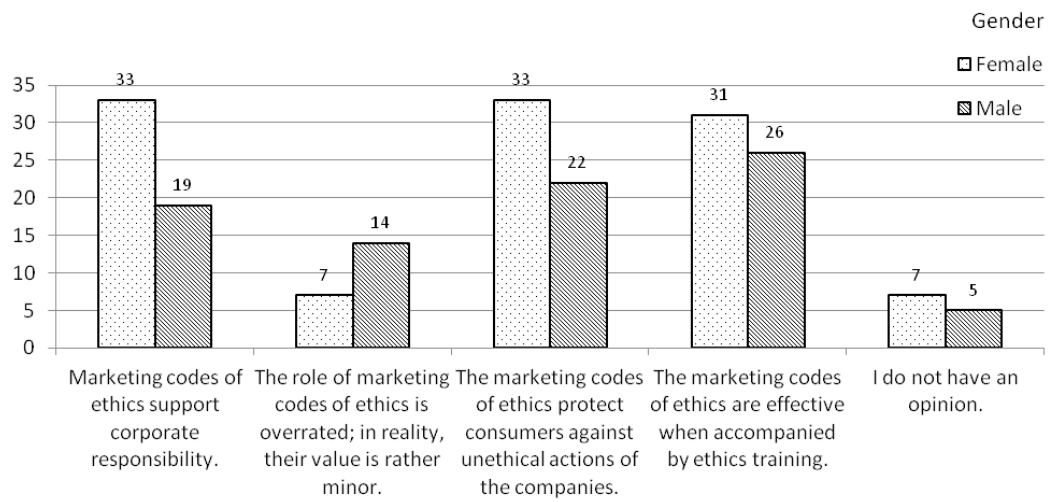


Figure 4.1: Significance of ethical codes in an organisation according to the respondents - the structure of responses according to gender.

When asked for the assessment of contemporary marketing actions, as much as 40% of the respondents did not have a formulated opinion in that scope. These actions were very positively and positively assessed by 35% of the respondents, negatively – by 20% and very negatively by 6% (Figure 5).

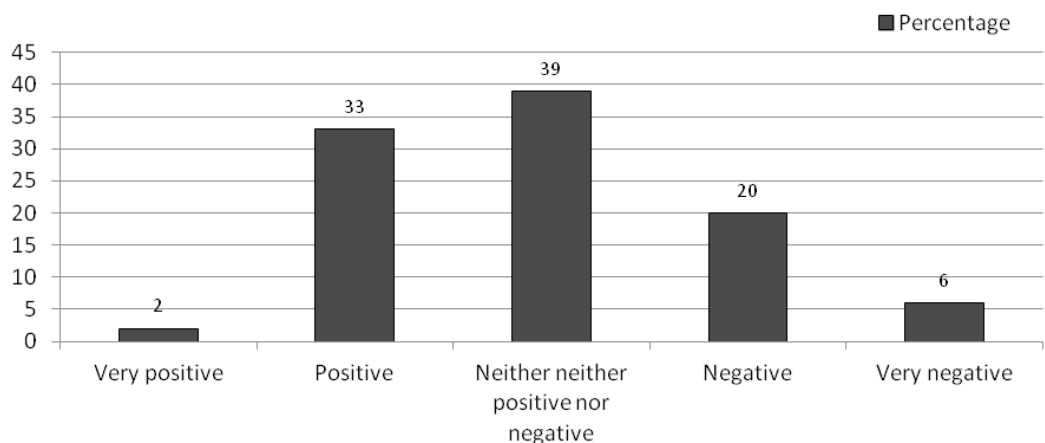


Figure 5: Assessment of marketing actions towards the customer according to the respondents.

The percentage of positive assessments is higher among the responses given by women. 37% of women and only 28% of men positively assessed the contemporary practice of marketing actions towards the customer, while there was not a “Very positive” reply among male

responses. Simultaneously, almost one third of men and only one fifth of women evaluated negatively and very negatively the practice of marketing. These interdependencies are presented in Figure 5.1.

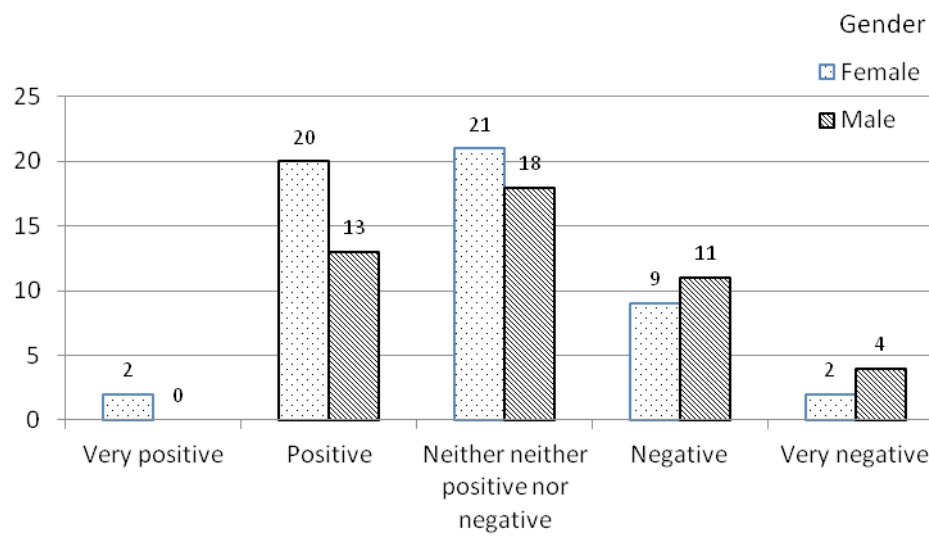


Figure 5.1: Assessment of marketing actions towards the customer according to the respondents – the structure of responses according to gender.

Only 2 people – aged 25-34 – assessed very positively the contemporary practice of marketing actions. Out of this age group also 2 people chose the “Very negative” reply. This group of respondents most frequently selected the “Neither positive nor negative” reply or the “Negative” one. The younger respondents (aged 18-24) selected the reply indicating the positive assessment of marketing practice (17 replies) or had no opinion in that regard (16 indications). The oldest respondent assessed positively the contemporary marketing. The respondents aged 35-44 indicated respectively: “Positive” – 6, “Neither positive nor negative” – 5, “Negative” – 4 people. The analysis of the response structure demonstrates that the similar responses were given by the respondents from the age group of 45-54. The respondent, who selected the age range “55-64”, replied “Neither positive nor negative” (see Figure 5.2)

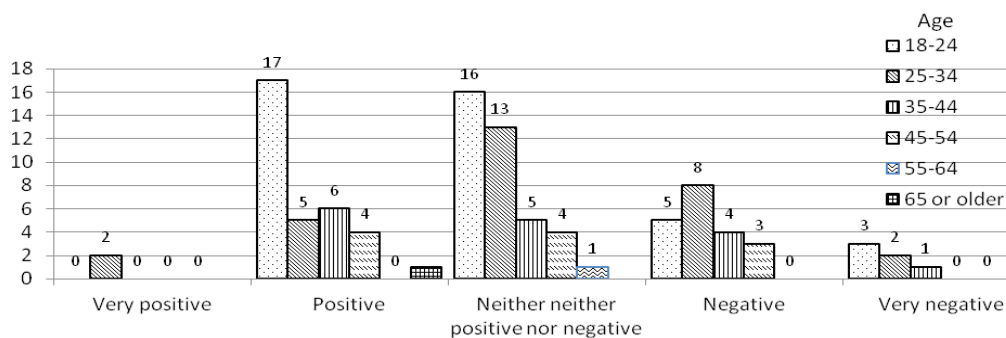


Figure 5.2: Assessment of marketing actions towards the customer according to the respondents – the structure of responses according to age.

30% of people with university degree negatively assessed the actions run by contemporary marketing towards the customer, while approximately the half of them (16 indications) selected the reply “Neither positive nor negative”. 4 people in this group chose the positive assessment.

15% of people with secondary education negatively assessed the practice of marketing, while 8% of them - very negatively. Almost 43% evaluated this practice positively. When asked for their assessment of the contemporary practice of marketing actions towards the customer, almost 32% of respondents from this group selected the variant “Neither positive nor negative” (see Figure 5.3).

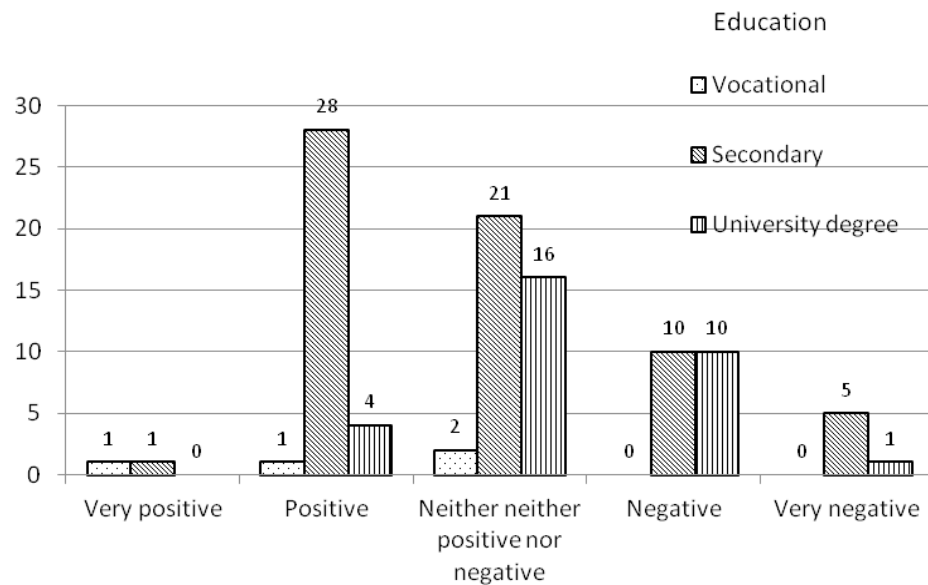


Figure 5.3: Assessment of marketing actions towards the customer according to the respondents – the structure of responses according to education.

In reply to the question “Does the company’s compliance with the rules of ethics have an impact on the clients’ behavior and their decisions to buy or not to buy a product”, 62% of respondents replied “Somewhat agree”, while 26 % “Strongly agree”. 4% of the respondents do not see any co-relation of these variables, while 8% do not have an opinion (see Figure 6).

By referring the analysis of dependencies to the criterion of sex, the quantitative data on the opinions of men and women, indicating the co-relation between the observance of ethical principles by a company and the customers’ attitude and purchase decisions taken by them, are similar. 12 women and 14 men replied “Strongly agree”, while 33 women and 29 men – “Somewhat agree”. The differentiation pertained to the replies”, “I do not have an opinion”, “Strongly disagree” and “Somewhat disagree”.

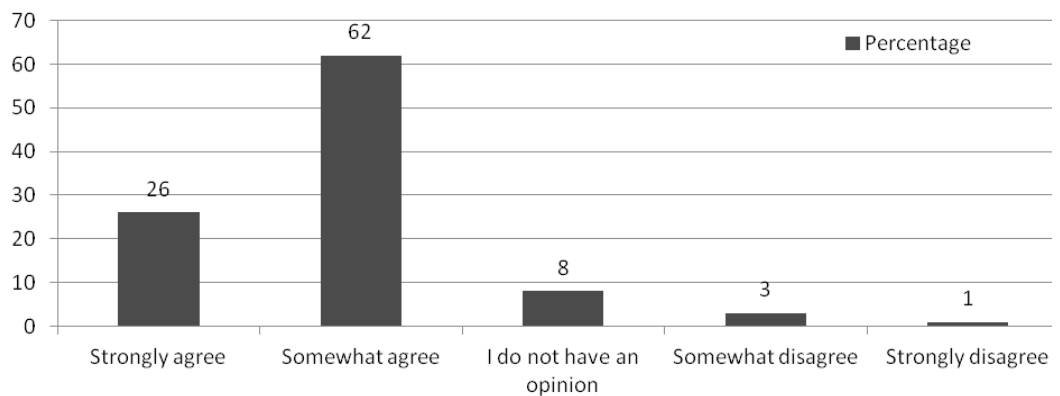


Figure 6: Impact of ethical principles observance by a company on the customers’ behaviour and attitude.

The respondents were also asked whether the marketing actions currently run by market entities were ethical. 45% of the respondents claimed that the marketing actions were rather unethical and absolutely unethical, while 32% considered them ethical. 23% of the respondents had no opinion in that regard, which is illustrated by Figure 7.

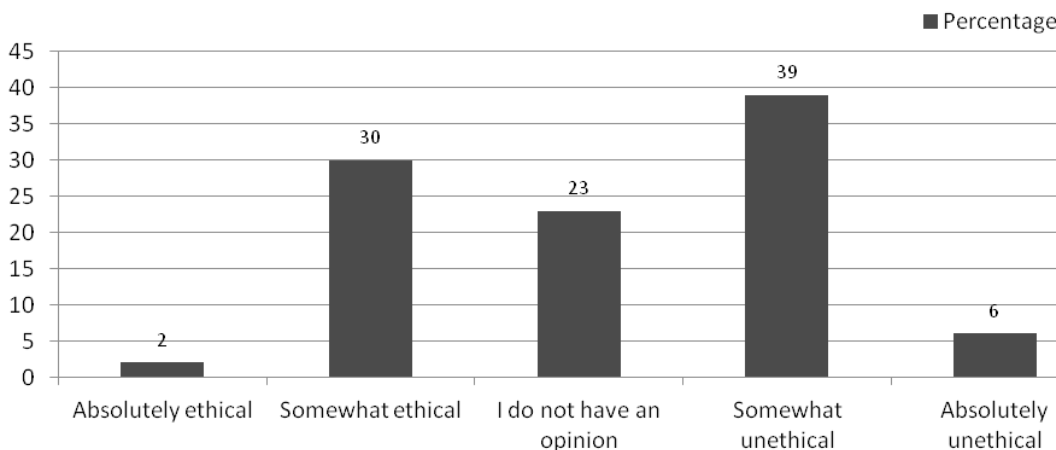


Figure 7: Assessment of corporate marketing actions in the context of ethics – evaluation by the respondents.

Over 58% of men and 33% of women were of the opinion that the marketing actions were not ethical. 26% of man and 37% of women assessed the aforementioned actions as ethical. 16 women and 7 men did not have an opinion in that regard. Therefore men to a larger extent than women negatively perceived the activities run by corporate entities in the sphere of marketing, taking into consideration its ethical evaluation (see Figure 7.1).

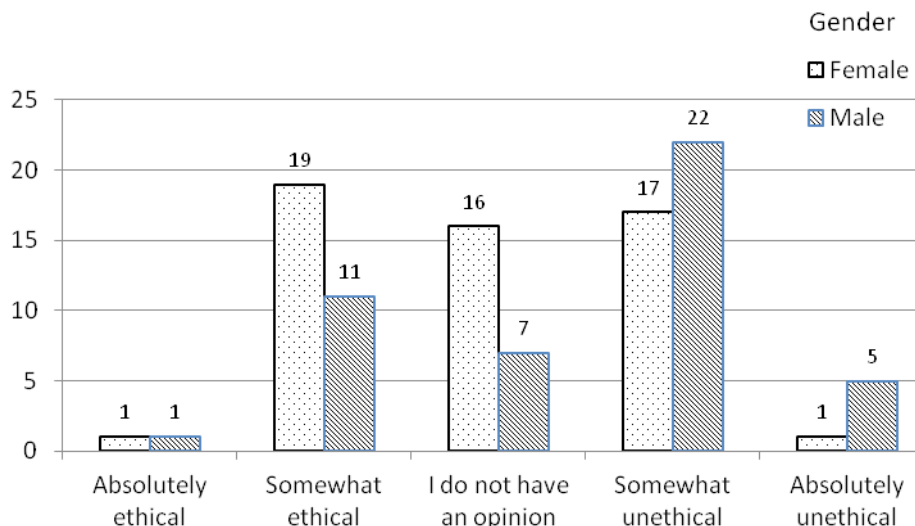


Figure 7.1: Assessment of corporate marketing actions in the context of ethics – the structure of responses according to gender.

The respondents with university degree tend to be more critical towards marketing than the respondents with secondary education. 65% of the former claimed that the marketing actions were not ethical, while only 16% perceived them as ethical. 19% had no opinion. Equally,

38% of the respondents with secondary education indicated their positive and negative assessment of the contemporary marketing ethics. In this segment 23% of the respondents had no opinion.

The subsequent question was as follows: *In what marketing areas can we observe unethical actions of organizations?*

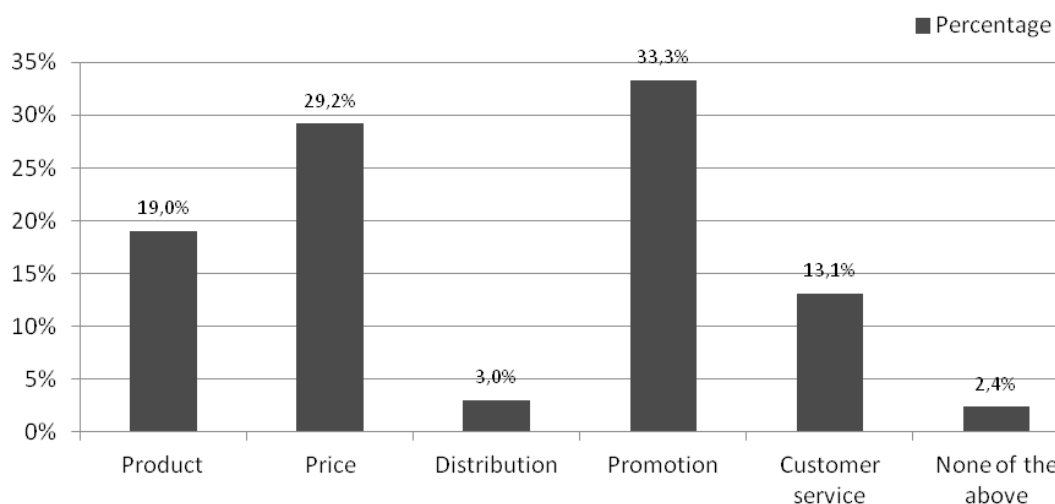


Figure 8: Marketing areas in which the respondents notice the organisation's unethical behaviour.

As demonstrated by Figure 8, according to the respondents the organisation's unethical behaviour may be observed mainly – according to the indications - in the following areas: promotion – 33,3% of indications, price – 29,2% and product – 19% of indications. The sphere of distribution recorded 3% of indications, while customer service - 13,1%.

The next-to-last question asked for indicating the negative marketing actions as experienced by the respondents. The following was indicated (Figure 9):

- unjustified overpricing of a product, inadequately to its quality – 14.5%;
- unreliable, dishonest advertising – 14%;
- offering within the promotional campaigns the products whose expiry date falls on a given day or has already passed – 10%;
- failure to meet earlier promises, assurances pertaining to service (its scope and quality) – 9,8%.

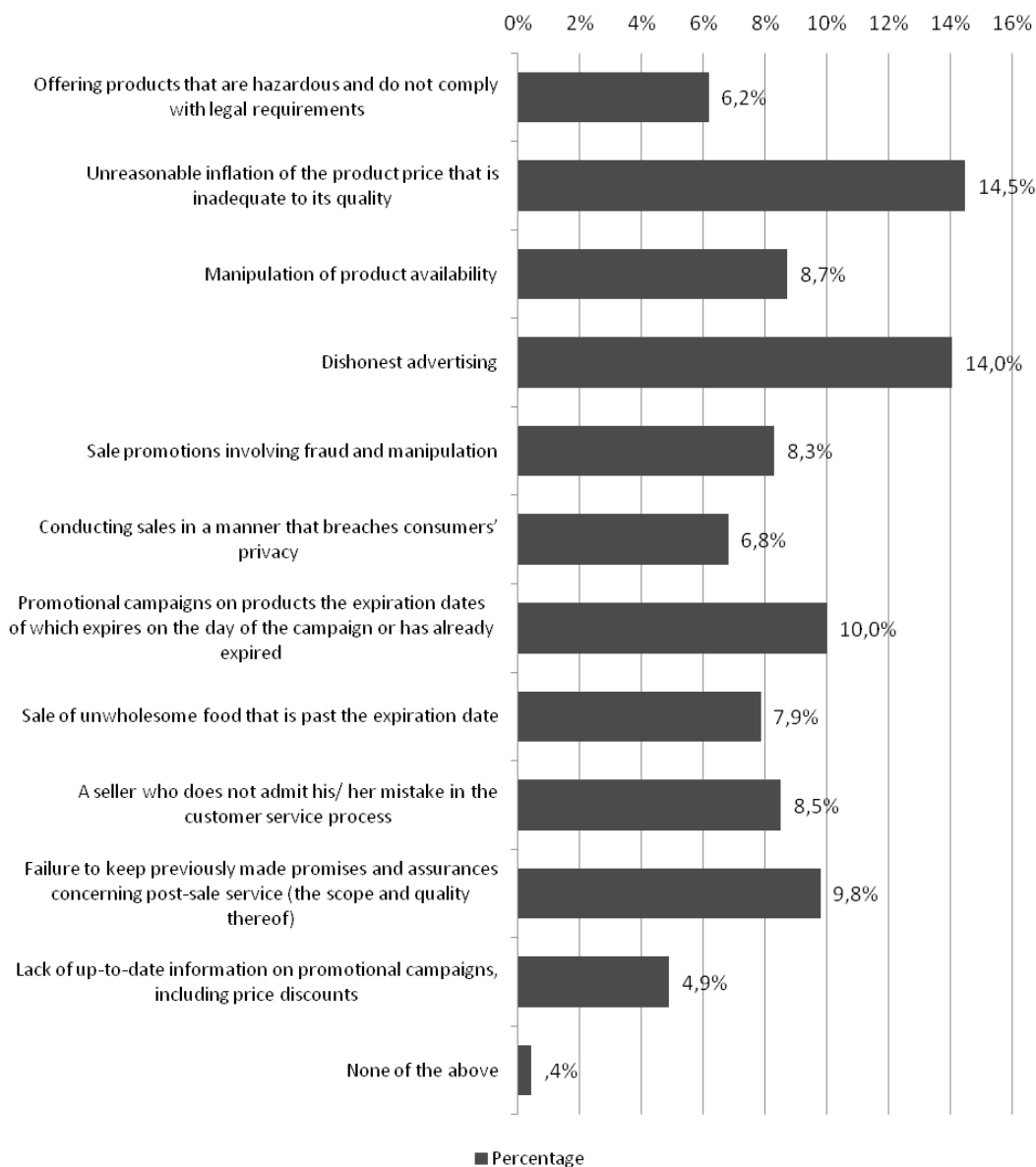


Figure 9: Unethical marketing actions as experienced by the respondents.

The last question of the survey was as follows: **How would you briefly describe the contemporary marketing addressed to clients?**

Not all the respondents formulated their own characteristics of the contemporary marketing. Their replies could be classified into two categories: positive and negative. Only 17% of the opinions contain positive characteristics. As many as 80% of the people, who presented their opinion on contemporary marketing, perceive it negatively. The replies of a few people indicate both positive and negative examples of marketing actions, for instance *“professional, however, in some cases too aggressive.”*

The following expressions could exemplify the positive perception:

- *Good marketing makes trade go round.*
- *Characteristics are fine.*
- *It follows the right path.*

- *In my opinion the contemporary marketing becomes more and more fledged and improved.*
- *In my opinion the contemporary marketing has become more professional and transparent for the Customers. These are good changes.*

Whereas the negative assessments were expressed via the respondents' opinions frequently stressing the customer manipulation:

- *Customer manipulation.*
- *Cheating, customer manipulation!*
- *The contemporary marketing applies the manipulation-based methods, which sometimes fail to present the reliable product features.*
- *The marketing has been created to manipulate and cheat the customer.*
- *Marketing – insincere manipulation of people.*
- *Manipulating people.*
- *The contemporary marketing is oriented only towards increasing the demand, the customer is not taken into consideration but only manipulated.*
- *Marketing based on the customer manipulation.*
- *Manipulation.*
- *Corporate manipulation.*
- *Encouragement to purchase some product or service with use of the customer manipulation.*

The negative characteristics rather frequently feature the term “aggressive”, for instance: *“aggressive forms of marketing, offering products and services ‘by force’, aggressive and omnipresent, aggressive, sometimes too aggressive, very aggressive, consisting in making up the ways of cheating the customers out of their money, e.g. by convincing them that a given product is necessary for them.”*

Discussion

The contemporary consumers are conscious subjects of the market. As demonstrated by the research, their opinions on marketing actions differ considerably. Some respondents do not have a formulated opinion, which would express a positive or negative assessment of marketing actions. The consumers do not approve and negatively assess the dishonest marketing actions. Though the research sample covered the group of 100 people, it would be difficult to question the opinions presenting a negative attitude towards the lying and misleading advertising, poor product quality, unjustified overpricing and failure to meet the contractual terms.

It should be stressed at this point that the ethical behaviour does not mean only refraining from evil. The ethical marketing specialist recognises that the position held by him/her in the society involves meeting certain obligations.

This mature corporate social responsibility should involve the process of creating a new better standard of life. Apart from the observance of the law and anticipation of the standard and reasonable public expectations, the organisations and units being the good corporate citizens initiate different types of actions for the benefit of the consumers and society. In such context of the corporate responsibility towards the society and the environment the world's most admired companies are evaluated (“Fortune” magazine with Hay Group published their list in 2012).

Many organisations have formal ethical codes, which determine the specific forms of conduct in the situations objectively deemed as unethical (e.g. bribes, acceptance of gifts) and describe the standards which the employees should follow. These guidelines are aimed at lowering the probability of conscious or unconscious breach of the determined standards by the employees. Moreover, the ethical codes strengthen the company's position towards the clients or situations that encourage the unethical behaviour. The employees should regard the codes as a valuable set of tips, being of assistance for them in overcoming the temptation to breach the

ethical principles, for instance to improve their standing in the company. However, its outcome calls for an in-depth recognition and analysis.

One of the most obvious benefits from the application of ethical principles in business operations is the reduction or elimination of costs connected with arisen conflicts. The full recognition and application of the ethical principles by corporate entities is directly translated into the company's profits.

The category of ethics referred to the standards of honest conduct and axiology constitutes the criterion of approval for the marketing code of conduct, the result of which is a perception of ethical standards as an integral element of the corporate actions. The consumers' opinions strongly support such approach.

Such implication is also confirmed by the analyses aimed at identifying the most ethical companies in the worlds, based to a large extent on the consumers' opinions.

Conclusions and Implications

According to the contemporary consumer, the ethics category involves the following notions: *honesty*, *reliability* and *compliance*. *The dominant feature* is honesty, indicated by the respondents regardless of their age and education. Almost all the respondents were of the opinion that the company's ethical character is manifested by the *manner of employee treatment*. Neither sex nor age differentiates opinions in that regard. The customers indicate the *structures and procedures for ethical behaviour assessment* as an opportunity for limiting and eliminating the unethical actions. The respondents definitely appreciate the existence and role of ethical codes of conduct, which protect the consumer but simultaneously perceive the significance of training that should accompany them. Approximately one third of the respondents very positively and positively assessed the contemporary marketing practices targeting the customer, while 26% assessed them negatively and very negatively. 45% of the respondents claimed that the marketing actions were rather unethical and definitely unethical, while 32% defined them as ethical. The customers notice the organisation's unethical behaviour in the following areas: *promotion*, *prices* and *product*. The customer service should be also listed among these areas. Frequently the respondents blame the marketing for the unjustified overpricing of a product, especially in relation to its quality as well as *unreliable and dishonest advertising*.

While defining the contemporary marketing within the open question, the majority of respondents (81% of all the replies) described marketing as an *aggressive tool, manipulating the customer, misleading the consumer and oriented only at a profit*.

There were also positive opinions, confirming the correct directions of marketing development, which according to the respondents was *professional* as well as more and more *transparent to the customer*, which enabled *the proper identification of a recipient and his/her needs, introduction and application of a relevant message with the use of different carriers – means of communication*.

The contemporary consumer is very conscious, frequently aware of the role and significance of the marketing concept of action and customer service, but not always positively perceiving the practice of actions within this area. This is illustrated by the following opinion on contemporary marketing presented in the survey: *"Interesting, innovative and efficient but frequently manipulating the consumer's sub-consciousness, of which the consumer is not aware"*.

Therefore, while implying, the following statement should be quoted, which realistically pictures the ethics of marketing in the practice of today: *"In terms of ethics the marketing is very differentiated. On the market one may find the companies which believe in the principles of ethics and apply them in practice, but many companies apply very offensive marketing, oriented only towards the profit, in which ethics is of minor significance or is of no relevance at all."*

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