

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING RESEARCH FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY OF MEDICAL SERVICES

Ph.D. Liviu CIUCAN-RUSU

”George Emil Palade” University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of
Targu Mures, Romania

E-mail: liviu.ciucan-rusu@umfst.ro

Ph.D. Student Mihai TIMUS

George Emil Palade” University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of
Targu Mures, Romania

E-mail: mihai.timus@u2b.umfst.ro

Ph.D. Iulia Elena VARGA

George Emil Palade” University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of
Targu Mures, Romania

E-mail: iulia.varga@umfst.ro

Abstract: *Marketing strategy has an important role in the success of a business because it ensures consumers access to information related to the products / services of the organization. Like businesses in other areas, medical businesses follow the same rules and are strongly influenced by political, social, economic and natural factors. A marketing strategy that is well conceived could ensure the competitiveness and survival of the business in the context of the obstacles that are shown to it. As a result, a strong marketing strategy cannot be achieved without consistent market research that encompasses current and potential customers. Our paper provides arguments on the importance and added value for the company of marketing research, based on a study of consumer behaviour in the field of dental services, the results of which deserve to become the foundations of business decisions both in terms of product policy and in the field of customer relations management.*

Keywords: *Marketing research, Healthcare Services, Micro-sustainability*

JEL Classification: *I11, I12, M31.*

1. Introduction

We all must admit that in the quest for competitiveness – the key for so called micro-sustainability - one supplier needs to better understand the consumer behavior in order to shape the marketing mix and the customer relationship management. In the case of the health care services sector there is a domain specific approach because of the fact that usually customers are in a dependent relation with the performer, with an inferior power of negotiation. Nevertheless, it is important for a small company in the industry to be aware of the triggers of the consumer behavior, therefore the primary goal of our study is to capture a synthetic, yet comprehensive picture regarding the main trends in the market. We focused on several key aspects like the prophylactic patterns, perception of the quality-price in the dental care services and factors of influence regarding the decision making, trying to find some segmentation proposals.

2. Background and Context

Would like to start with the definition of a business as a competition for customers that choose some specific outputs, thus bringing value added to the company and ensuring its micro sustainability. In the care of services, and we consider that health care is an enhanced proof, the quadruple helix of a marketing deal involves the company, the employees, the customer and the society. Although the buying process consist of the classical phases, the motivation of the customer is based on highly sensitive components.

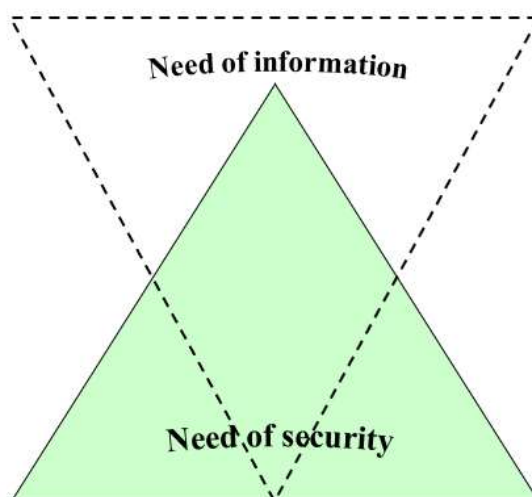


Figure 2.1 The key triggers in an adapted Maslow model for health care services

As we presented in the model above, there are two key triggers of the consumer behavior that performers in health care services should be very aware: on one hand is the need for security because of the risks and on the other hand is the need for information regarding the procedures, treatments, etc.

We assume that marketing strategy in the context of healthcare services must be oriented on competitors as on consumers. First refers to businesses which build their products and services based on competitors' know-how and second on customers' needs. Usually, when businesses' strategies are more oriented to customers this can ensure a better performance of the company (Al-Surmi, Cao and Duan, 2020). To build a customers oriented organization is crucial to understand in detail the market for medical services and, in particular, the factors that are likely to lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Lowe and Gilligan, 2016). In this case, a survey applied to customers could be powerful tool for businesses. Asking customers how they fill and what they want to get from your business activities can ensure that you sell right products and services to right people. Identifying and asking something to potential customers means to start a marketing research.

The costs of health care services increase as prices of other goods increase affected by inflation rate and other reasons, therefor consumers will examine the comparative value provided by a healthcare organization, just as they do for most major purchases (Numerof and Abrams, 2016). This is the reason to involve marketing strategies to highlight added value of services provided and the competitive advantage of health care organization. Nowadays, patients are more interested in the cost of medical treatments, and the value received for each expense. In the digital age, customers can access any information about their health with or without a healthcare professional, therefor is crucial to ensure customers with right information, this is another reason to apply a marketing strategy (Haimowitz, 2013).

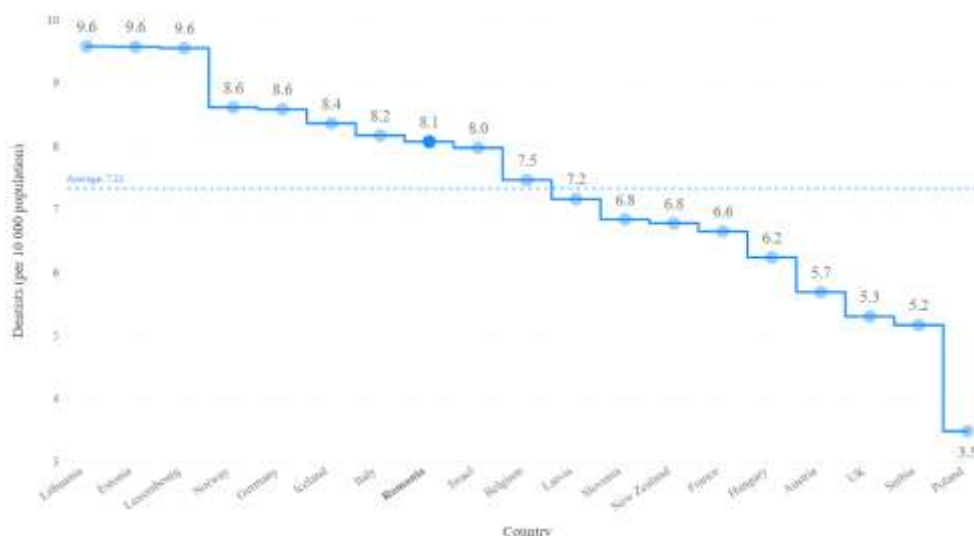


Figure 2.2. Dentists per 10000 inhabitants by Country

Source: WHO, 2020. accessed 1st April 2020

In our study we refer to dental services market so, we must mention that as population of Romania decrease in past 10 years, the total number of dentists increased, in 2016 in Romania worked 15965 dentists and reached 8 dentists per 10000 inhabitants (WHO, 2020). This means that competition in the sector also increased. From data available for year 2016 couple of countries was selected to identify position of Romania regarding competition in the field of dentists' services. In the Figure 2.2 we can see that Romania is situated above the average which confirm existing of competition in this domain. In this context dentists must ensure a continuous flow of clients and keep them by quality of the services or pricing strategies. As we mentioned above, in both cases they must apply a marketing research to know the market and apply other strategies. Next section reflects our study by a survey applied to different categories of clients.

In any marketing research, businesses must follow several steps to reach the goals which was fixed at the beginning of implementation of marketing plan. Steps in the Marketing Research Process are (Kotler and Lee, 2007):

- Determine Purpose – *to what businesses` needs response marketing research?*
- Identify Informational Objectives – *what are specific questions we want to find an answer?*
- Determine Audience – *they are current customers, potential customers o other stakeholders?*
- Select Research Technique – *depends on the type of relation with targeted group, what are the channels and methods through you will get the information/answers?*
- Develop Sample Plan – *how many people you will involve?*
- Pre-test Draft Instruments – *involve well known people to test your method (clients and stakeholders which wasn't involved in the development of the method)*
- Field the Research – *who is responsible for marketing research process?*
- Analyse Data – *who will analyse the data collected and how will be analysed it?*

- Write a Report and Present Recommendations – *findings of research, are they enough to respond to questions? Did you find more than you were searching for? What is the best way to represent the results?*

3. Methodology, findings and results

The research that we've conducted was focused on key questions regarding teeth health among the population from central Transylvania.

The main *objectives* of the study are related with the following aspects:

- Evaluate the teeth health of the respondent's;
- Analyze the respondent's extent of dental prophylaxis elements usage;
- Identifying the main characteristics of dental health behavior (if they are going regularly to the dentist, how often, for what reason, if they go to the same dentist or to a different one);
- Highlighting the main factors which influence choosing the dentist;
- Evaluate the respondent's perception regarding dentist's prices and special offers;
- The respondent's structure by socio-demographic variables.

To meet these objectives, we built a questionnaire that included both closed and open types of questions. The closed ones include questions with one or multiple options, the Likert scale, the importance scale, the appreciation scale or the purchase intention scale.

The sample was chosen randomly, being based on the respondent's free will to participate in the survey, but the goal to cover all socio-demographic categories included in the questionnaire is reached. The data was collected both in printed and electronic format, using Google Forms during early spring 2020. The collected data was then centralized in a SPSS database, where a series of analyzes were performed, and in the end the charts were generated using Excel.

Considering that the data was collected until very recently, this paper will present only a horizontal analysis of the data, and in the future, we will extend it to the analysis of correlations, hypothesis testing and maybe, extrapolation of the results to other areas of Romania.

The sample included a number of 486 respondents from the central Transylvanian region, only 422 answers being valid, and it was analyzed based on relevant items according to the decision tested among a group of dentists. These variables are gender, age, occupation and the average monthly income. According to these variables the sample structure is as follows:

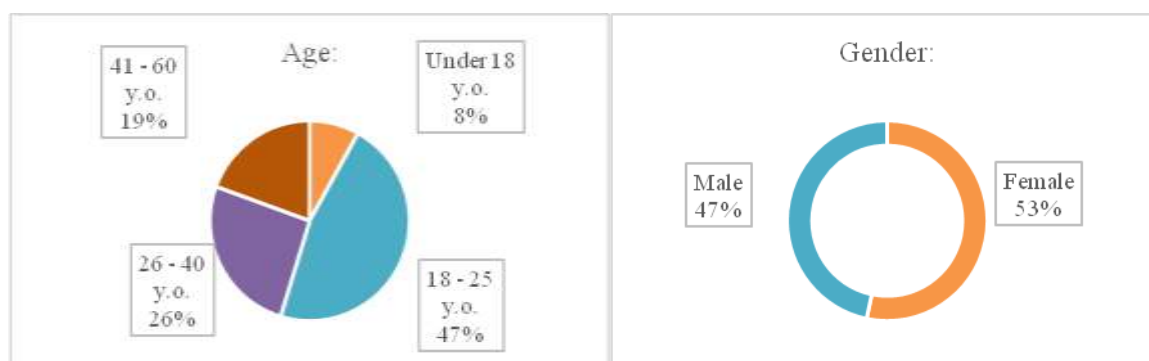


Figure 3.1. The respondent's age and gender

Most of the respondents (about 73%) were between 18 and 40 years old, while the structure of the sample by gender is almost equal, i.e. 53% female and 47% male.

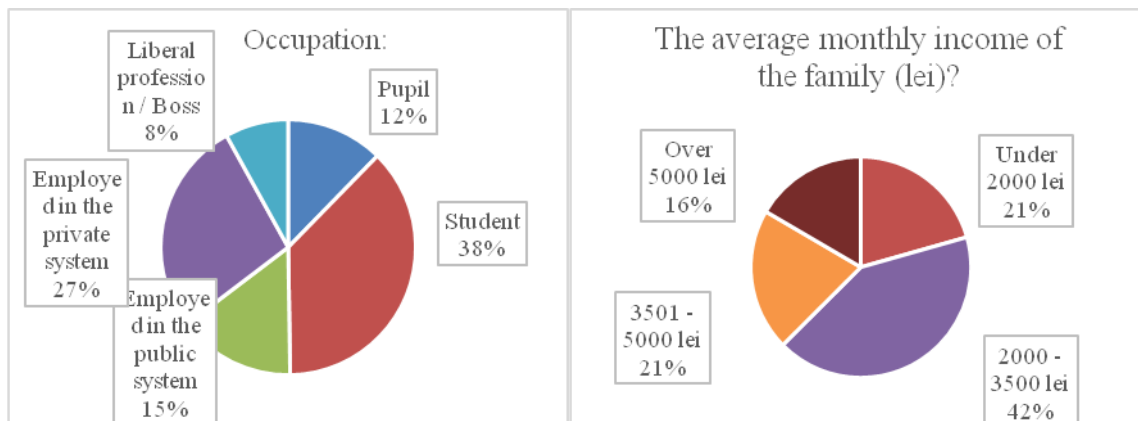


Figure 3.2. The respondent’s occupation and monthly income

Regarding the occupation, students and those employed in the private system were best represented in the sample, with 38%, respectively 27% of the respondents. If we look at the income situation, we can see that 42% of the respondents earn monthly between 2.000 and 3.500 lei, while 16 % of them earn over 5.000 lei per month. The rest (42%) is equally shared between those who earn under 2.000 lei per month, respectively between 3.501 and 5.000 lei.

4. Results of the study

Our study began with a self-evaluation of the teeth’s health, on a scale from 1 to 10, the respondents being asked to rate the level at which they consider it.

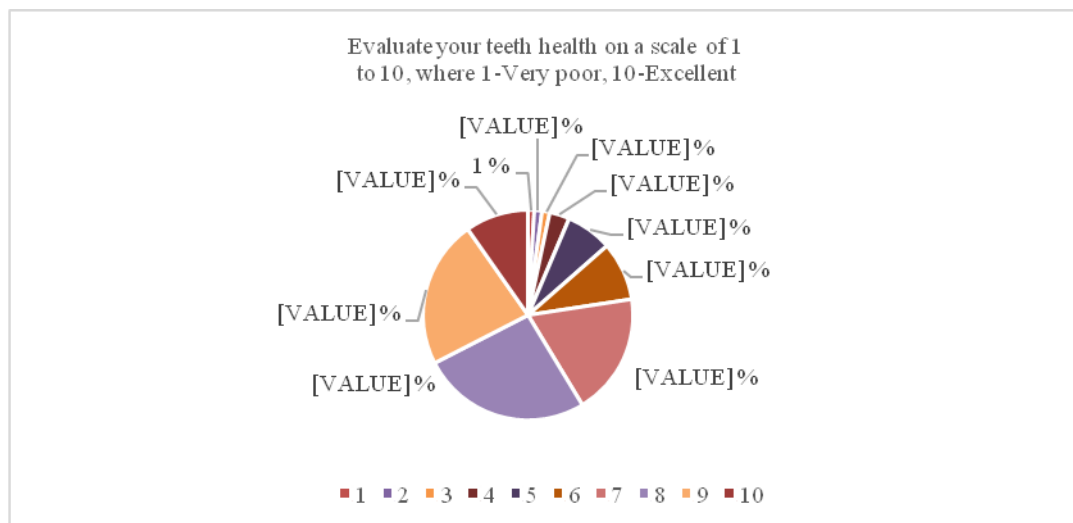


Figure 3.3. The respondent’s teeth health

Over 93% of the respondents believe that the health of their teeth deserves a grade higher than 5, most of them (67,7%) choosing values between 7 and 9.

When it comes to respondent’s dental health maintenance habits, the situation looks like the representation in the figure 3.4.

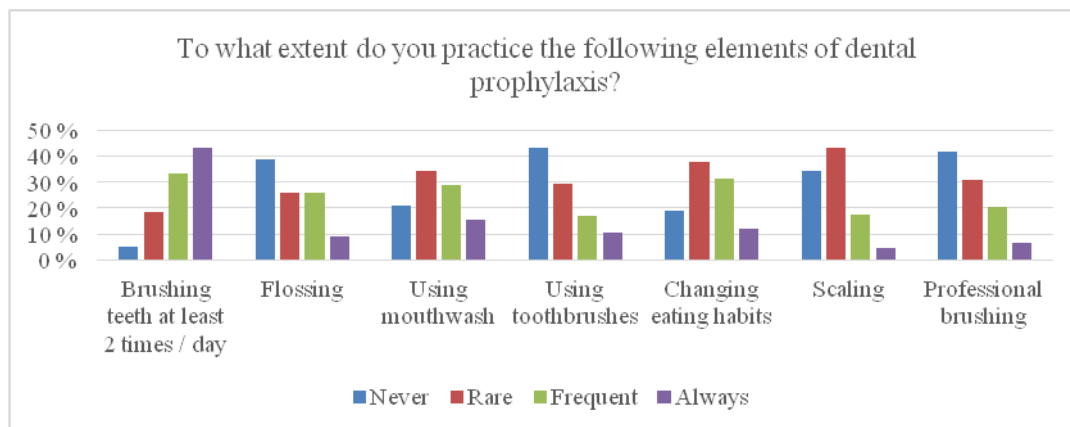


Figure 3.4. Dental prophylaxis

As we can see in the figure above, 43.2% respectively 33.4% always or frequently brush their teeth at least 2 times/day, 15.6% respectively 28.7% always or frequently uses mouthwash and 43% are changing eating habits. On the other hand, 43.4% of the respondents never use toothbrushes, 41.6% never resort to professional brushing and 38.9% are never using dental floss.

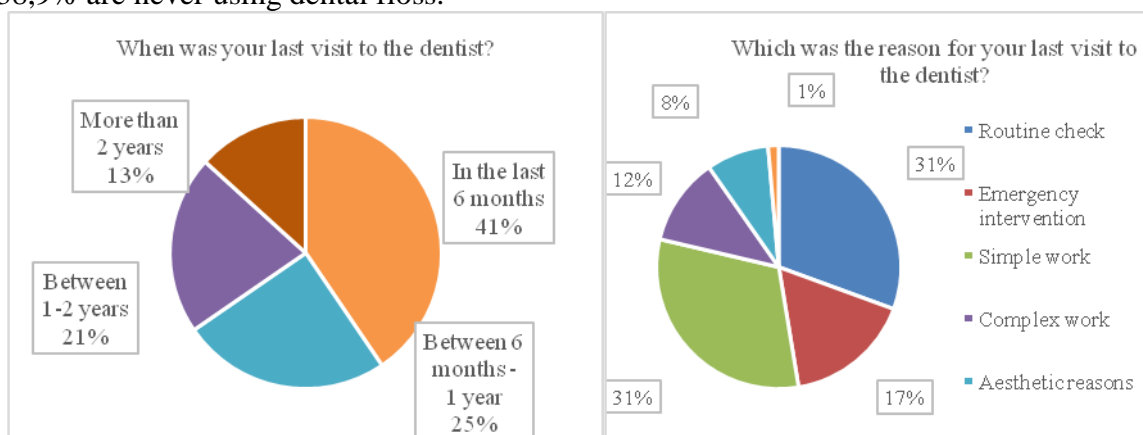


Figure 3.5. Time and reason for last dental check-up

Regarding the last visit at the dentist, things are looking very good, and that's because more than 65% of the respondents went in the last year to a dentist for routine check (31%), simple work (31%), or for aesthetic reasons (17%).

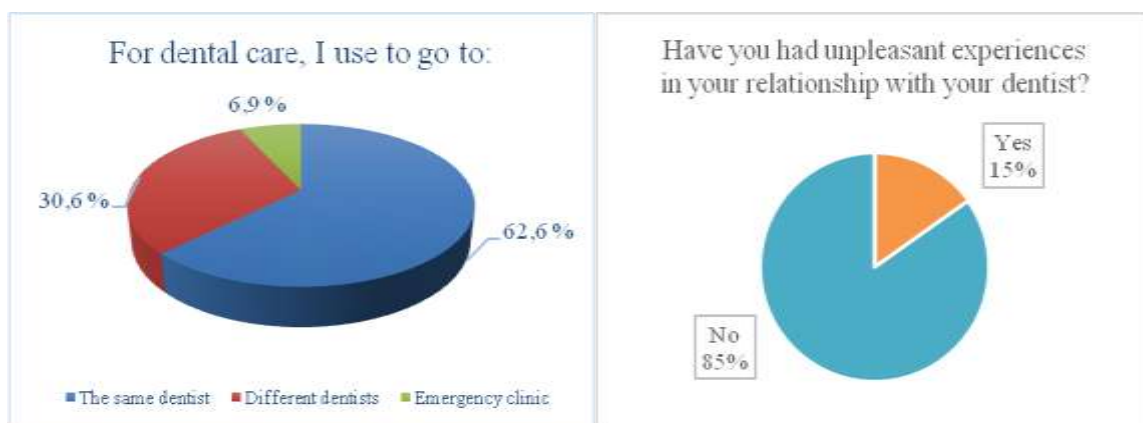


Figure 3.6. Respondent's experience with dentists

An important aspect of our study was identifying the main behavior characteristics of the respondent's dental health. Therefore, we wanted to see if they go at the same dentist or to a different one each time, and if this behavior is influenced by the relationship they've had. The results are showing that 62,6% of the respondents choose to go to the same dentist each time and only 30,6% to a different dentist. This behavior is sustained also by the fact that they've didn't had unpleasant experiences in the relationship with their dentist (85%). If we think about the people's general fear of going to the dentist, this could be an encouraging aspect, which could lead us being more preoccupied about the health of our teeth.

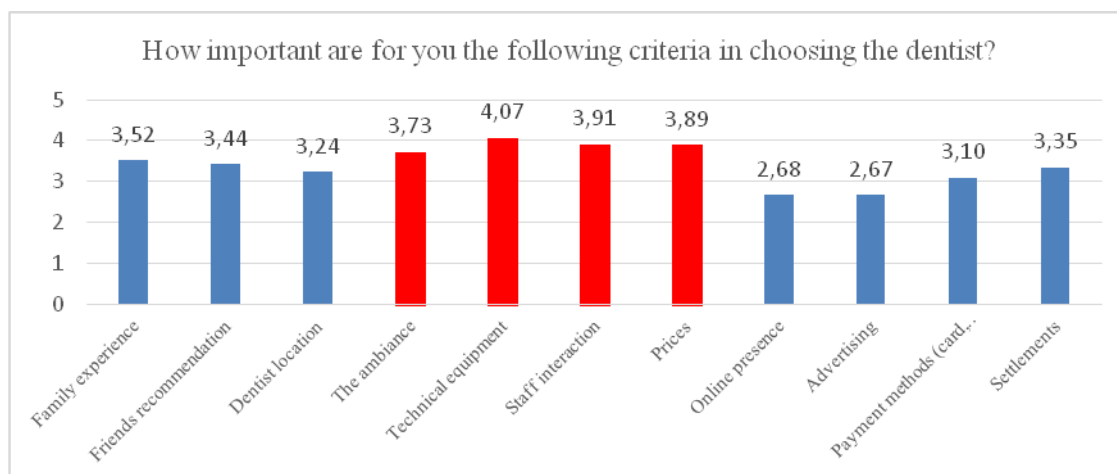


Figure 3.7. Criteria in choosing the dentist

The above criteria were analyzed on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means not at all important and 5 very important. Among the most important criteria mentioned by the respondents are technical equipment (with an average score of 4,07), staff interaction (with an average score of 3,91), prices (with an average score of 3,89) and the ambiance (with an average score of 3,73). The least important criteria were the advertising and the online presence.

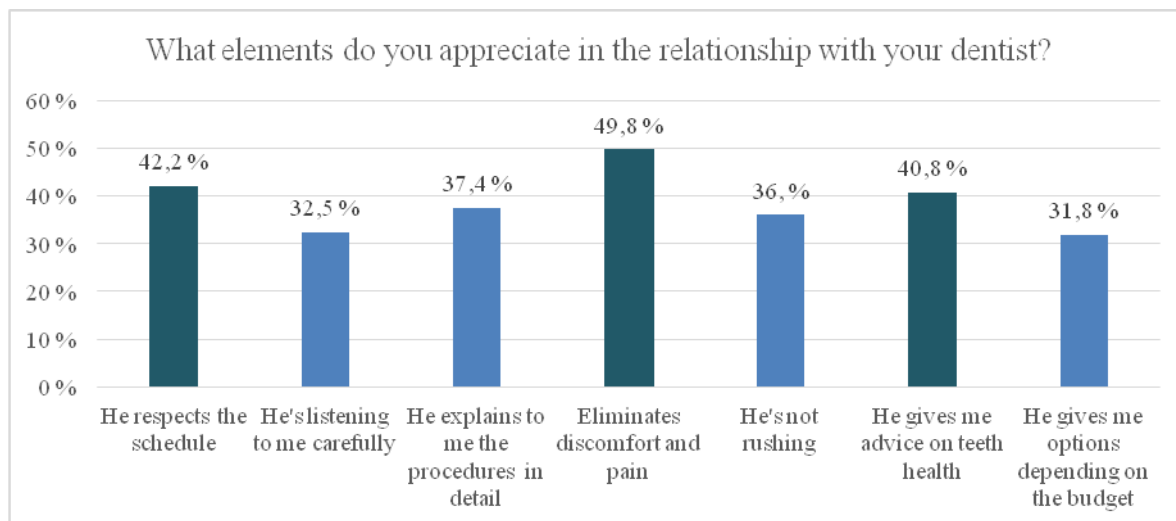


Figure 3.8. Appreciated aspects by the respondents

In figure 8, we show the most appreciated elements in the client-dentist relationship, and as we can observe, for most of the respondents (49,8%) eliminating

discomfort and pain is the most important aspect, followed by respecting the appointment schedule and then giving advice on teeth health.

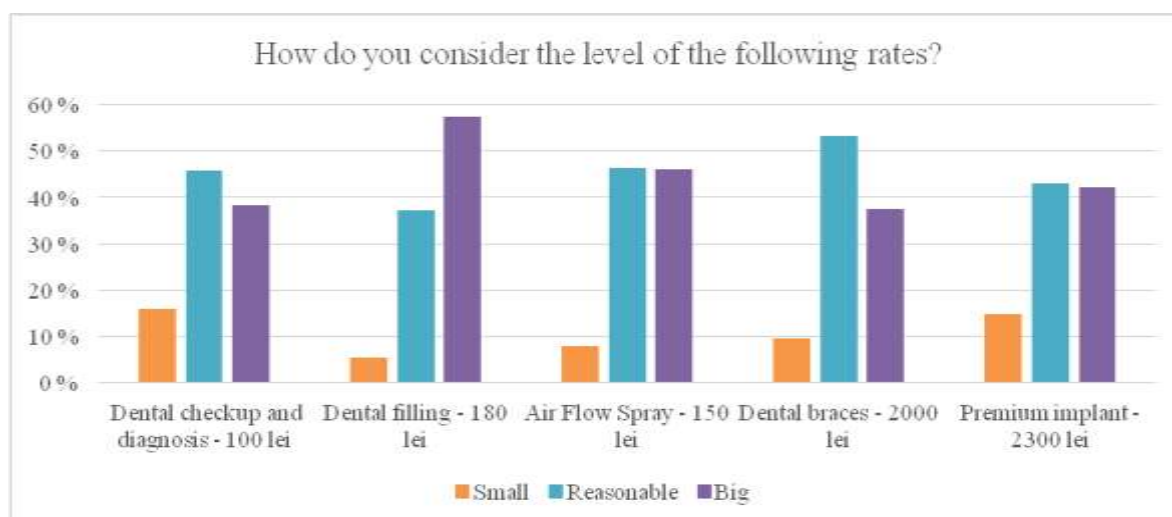


Figure 3.9. Respondent's perception towards prices

The last aspect considered in this study is related to the respondent's perception regarding dentist's prices and special offers. 100 lei for dental checkup and diagnosis is considered a reasonable price by most of the respondents, and the same goes for 2.000 lei for a dental brace. The prices for dental filling (180 lei) are perceived as being expensive for 57,3% of the respondents.

Regarding respondent's intentions for dentist's special offers, free extended diagnosis and discounts were mostly appreciated, while subscriptions and family packages raised less interest.

5. Conclusions

This paper is a part of a broader study regarding the dental health care service, where we try to provide a mapping of factors affecting the specific business environment.

Even though in the health care services the physician dominates the negotiation with consumer we could identify in Romania pretty intensive competition among dentist and dental clinics. The needs of information and security seem to be the most important aspects that the motivation of the patient is driven. The marketing strategies of a dental clinic should be focused on the communication in order to improve the knowledge and understanding of the customer in a world of contradictory information.

The main findings of our survey lead us several important statements: more than two third of our sample rated their level of teeth health as good and very good; one third of the respondents don't visit the dentist at least once a year; the majority of the sample prefers the same dentist. When touching the topic of choice, the order of the main criteria is the following: technical assets, staff interaction, prices, the ambiance of the facilities. The most appreciated features of a dentist seem to be: eliminates discomfort and pain, respect the schedule and advices provided about teeth health. Most of the respondents are prone to accept the prices of specific procedures and treatments.

We consider that, from the customer relationship management perspective, transforming the service providing in a long-term relation based on communication and support is a significant aspect, and a constant screening of the client's profile is critical to the sustainable marketing policy of a company.

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