Chapter 13

Marketing of Virtual Healthcare Communities as Being Distance and Open Learning (DOL) Environments

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ABSTRACT

Like in all areas, virtual communities make their presence felt in the area of healthcare. Virtual communities play an important role in healthcare in terms of gathering information on healthcare, sharing of personal interests, and providing social support. Virtual communities provide a way for a group of peers to communicate with each other. In the health context, they may also be referred to as electronic support groups. They include forums, discussion boards on websites, mailing lists, chat rooms, or newsgroups.

This chapter provides an overview and discussion of virtual communities in healthcare. In this chapter, the state of marketing implications in virtual communities in the health care sector is reviewed. The case study method was used. Data were collected from a website about healthcare, as content analysis. CRM, customization, marketing research and database, e-word of mouth, e-services, and promotions as marketing tools were used in the virtual community.

The findings indicate that members of the reviewed website used forums heavily as a means of interactivity and gathering of health related and social based information.

INTRODUCTION

Today, like in all areas, the Internet has had an important effect in the area of health as well. With the development of the Internet many new and different applications have developed and one of the most important of these are probably virtual communities. Virtual communities, which are used as a tool for providing information and word of

mouth communication, have become a widely used marketing tool in the area of healthcare services in recent years. A virtual community is a group that does not depend on space and time to maintain ties or participation in the group whose members share the same interest and to maintain closeness, that is based on internet communications and whose membership is based on free will. In these kinds of communities whose services are provided on a membership basis, health services of various kinds are offered to the members.

In virtual communities, virtual interactive communications established between the members can be an important determining factor when choosing a product, service or doctor. Just like in traditional word of mouth communications, the advice given by the members of virtual communities can have a significant effect on other members, since the advice givers are experienced about the product they communicate on for a length of time. Due to this characteristic of theirs, virtual communities have begun to make their presence felt more and more in the marketing of healthcare services (Argan and Tokay-Argan, 2007).

Many people use the Internet regularly to stay healthy or to gather information about their health problems. These kinds of information used to be provided by healthcare professionals and only when they were needed. This situation began to change at the end of the 1990s and digital healthcare information started to become widespread. The biggest power behind the prevalence of digital healthcare information has been the Internet (Homewood, 2004). Even though the Internet, and especially the World Wide Web, is an important source of information about health and illnesses, the quality of the information available is still being argued today (Wallace, 1997).

Demanding more information than they were being offered, consumers of healthcare services started to use interactive mediums. Virtual communities attract attention as the most important tool that provides interactivity. Consumers who interact on a web site obtain information about

health through three methods. These are; published online information sources, informal information obtained from other members of the virtual community, and information obtained as a result of interactions with healthcare professionals. For example, in Great Britain MedicDirect (medic-direct.co.uk) offers an interactive health service to its members. The visitors of the web site ask questions to expert healthcare professionals via e-mails and toll free telephone numbers, and get answers to their questions.

E-HEALTH AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

E-service can be defined as information giving, transactions and distribution of services in order for leveraging up the delivery and the quality of services through the help of the internet (Lankton and Wilson, 2007:85). E- health is the combination of information and limited clinical services together. E-health is spreading today due to its cost effectiveness and fastness of acquiring such services by patients. E-health is twofold. First is from the organizational perspective where healthcare service is provided. The key here is the swiftness of the servide provided; cost efficiency and wher required the applicability of individualised services. From patients' perspective, practicality of getting information, diagnosis and effectiveness of treatment provided to them is the core of the service.

Online health channels are quite common in our daily lives, and such channels are getting spread in numbers (Berkowitz, 2006: 268). Online channels are used by many pations and many portals are providing health services to their customers. For instance, Portrer's Health Care System web page provides a three step registration process to the site. In first two steps both patients and doctors register to the web page, and then they upload x-rays and MRI scans to the portal. At the third stage, specialist would come up with his or

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