HOW CONSUMERS ARE SEARCHING: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNET TO THE HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The internet has become an important source of information for healthcare services. The reasons for consumers' decision not to use the internet as an information source still need further investigation in order to fully understand the processes that consumers experience during this decision-making period (Rha, Montalto, & Widdows, 2003).

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare industries are becoming more and more competitive and are now faced with the dilemma of how to market their services. It is important for marketing researchers to get a complete understanding of this industry and its function in order to implement a solid marketing strategy. Healthcare marketing is still in its infancy (Beckham, 2001). When dealing with healthcare services, especially physician services, even less attention has been given to how consumers seek out information on these services. In healthcare, the competition is becoming more intense (Beckham, 2001). The managers of these services need to know what they have to do in order to keep consumer relationships strong. Case (2005) acknowledged the importance of information search in the healthcare field, but admits fragmentation, weak and borrowed theory, incompatible methods, and results that may be less cumulative than ever. King and Haefner (1988) agree that an understanding of the sources and types of information used in selecting a physician can help health care professionals place useful information within easy reach of consumers. Not only do consumers need to know that there are more types of sources of information (i.e., word-of-mouth or internet sites), but there are possibly several ways to obtain the information even when it is for themselves or for a loved one.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

A better understanding of how consumers search for information on healthcare will help to promote more efficient ways to target and promote these services to consumers. The purpose of this research is also to provide knowledge to managers of physician service providers, so that they may use the information to implement measures to assist their consumers searching for information. This research also proposes to provide evidence to support the consideration of consumers becoming more knowledgeable about ways to search for credence services. It is our position that consumers will start to utilize internet objective information sources rather than just depending on subjective data (word-of-mouth). By seeking out the sources that consumers currently use and comparing them to the background literature, an analysis of if there will be any difference with the advance of technology.

Propositions and Information Gathering

There were two propositions for this paper. They both addressed how much more satisfying of a service provider/consumer relationship healthcare providers could have if consumers had access to more objective information about their services, as well as, how much more we could learn as marketing researchers if we knew and understood the sources consumers were utilizing for these credence based services. A focus group and in-depth interviews were utilized to gather information about consumers thought process in reference to this particular situation. What was found is even though it was decreed twenty years ago that consumers are more likely to reference a subjective word-of-mouth source for a credence service, that consumers today are more comfortable using objective (i.e. in this case internet) sources to research and find information about healthcare services, which are considered full credence services. Armed with this information, the authors feel that this is a beginning to a new era of information searching that needs to be fully investigated in order to fully understand the impact it will have on the marketing arena. There are great implications that will affect how organizations are currently utilizing their marketing plans and placement.

References Available on Request.