

Examining the Effectiveness of Relationship Marketing Strategies on Medical Tourism

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Abstract

Medical tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world as many patients are looking to access healthcare services that are not available to them in their home countries. Many hospitals and healthcare centers are now offering numerous products and services in order to fully reap the benefits from it. However, little research which examines the effects of relationship marketing on the medical tourism exists. Hence, the aims of this study are to: (1) examine the relationship between the relationship marketing strategies and the medical tourism industry; and (2) help medical tourism operators to identify some of the key issues that exist within the industry. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten senior Taiwanese tour guides who had extensive experience in dealing with the medical tourism industry. The results indicate that relationship marketing was one of the crucial factors which had an impact on the willingness of tour guides to make necessary travel arrangements for medical tourists. The environment of health examination center, the ability of its doctors to diagnose a patient's condition, and the professional image of its doctors could also affect the effectiveness of the relationship marketing on medical tourism as well as the efforts in arranging a follow-up visit to the health examination center. The findings can provide senior executives of health examination centers and travel agencies with a more realistic insight in dealing with issues and challenges arising from the medical tourism.

Keywords: healthcare, hospital, medical tourism, relationship marketing, Taiwan

1. Introduction

1.1 Medical Tourism

Medical tourism is a growing phenomenon associated with globalization.¹ It has been defined by Sheppard et al.² as the event of “individuals intentionally traveling

from their home province or country to receive medical care”. It is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world as many medical tourists are looking to access healthcare services (e.g., cosmetic, dental, optical, and surgical) that are not available or affordable to them in their home countries.³ Medical tourism is also emerging as a lucrative money earner for some of the developing countries.⁴ It has been estimated to worth around US\$38.5-55 billion and is growing at a rate of 15-25%

annually.⁵ Some of the top destinations for medical tourism include Hong Kong, India, Israel, Malaysia, Mexico, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey.⁵ More and more hospitals and medical providers in these destinations are now offering their healthcare services in order to fully reap the benefits from it.⁶ Some of the main reasons for medical tourists going overseas to receive medical treatments are: immediate and high quality medical services, opportunity to travel to other countries or exotic destinations, flexibility in arranging medical services overseas, and high health insurance premiums in their home countries.^{7,8} In addition, overseas healthcare providers are often more willing to provide medical tourists with an upfront estimate of the medical treatment. Hence, for medical tourists, medical tourism offers an inexpensive alternative for receiving medical treatment overseas without compromising on quality.⁹

The globalization of healthcare has enabled travel agencies and facilitators specializing in medical tourism to offer packages to tourists who want to receive medical treatments overseas. These medical tourism operators have been trying to deliver high quality travel products and services to medical tourists as well as to build strong relationships with other medical providers. They have often joint forces with health examination centers to invest in relationship marketing in order to develop, maintain, evaluate, and improve a customer relationship system as they are crucial in achieving competitive advantages in medical tourism industry.^{10,11,12,13,14} The industry itself is as complex as other industries and requires other industries such as business-to-business (B2B), information technology (IT), services, accommodation, and finance to provide products and services to the medical tourists.^{15,16,17} Many countries are making legal and tactical plans to serve their booming medical tourism industry.^{4,18} As mentioned earlier, it has also become an importance source of income for many countries. These countries have been continuing to investment heavily in all aspects of medical tourism (e.g., IT, social, human resources).^{19,20} The implementation of effective relationship marketing systems and strategies could enable these players to reduce marketing costs, create customer loyalty, and secure lifetime customers.^{13,21} The key is to carefully evaluate these IT systems as well as to ensure the creation of a connection or relationship which is centered on trust that is produced through the

consistent delivery of quality products or services that at least meets customer expectations.^{22,23,24,25,26} From the perspective of health providers (e.g., hospitals, health examination centers), medical tourism is about building relationship with medical tourists and medical tourism operators. Similar to other industries, appropriate customer relationship and marketing strategies, advertising, and word-of-mouth communication can play an important role in attracting medical tourists.^{27,28,29} Repeat overseas tourists have often been influenced by relationship factors such as the reputation of health services providers, word of mouth (via family and friends) and doctor's referral.^{27,30} Hence, relationship marketing can play an important part in medical tourism.

1.2. Relationship Marketing

There are many notable differences between relationship marketing and traditional marketing. Traditional marketing is a strategy that a company uses to determine if it can produce a viable product to meet consumer demand.^{31,32,33} It relies on transactional marketing strategy that focuses on single point of sale transactions and the emphasis is generally on maximizing the efficiency and revenue rather than developing and managing customer relationship.^{34,35} In this case, a product or service is just seen as a commodity, not a brand name which can be used to distinguish one product or service from its competitors.^{36,37,38} The main purpose of having a brand name is often associated with the ability to charge higher prices as well as better access to the market.^{36,37,38} However, transactional marketing is a short-sighted business strategy that aims at one-off transactions.³⁹ As mentioned earlier, it is a strategy that focuses on maximizing profit, sales volume and efficiency without forming a long-term on-going relationship with customers.³⁹ Products and services are usually created and priced in accordance with customer preferences and little marketing effort is needed after sales are completed.³⁹ In contrast to relationship marketing, relatively little upfront IT/R&D investment evaluation, costs, and time are needed to maintain relationships with consumers.^{39,40,41,42,43,44} The main drawbacks of this type of marketing strategy are the lack of brand recognition as well as the lack of a stable base of returning customers.³⁹

On the other hand, relationship marketing has broader, customer-oriented objectives than transactional marketing. It focuses on developing, understanding, and maintaining long-term customer relationships which include marketing strategies such as branding, customer service, customer personalization, public relations, and customer loyalty incentives.⁴⁵ Relationship marketing also encompasses activities associated with establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchange.⁴⁶ This includes 10 discrete forms: goods suppliers, services suppliers, competitors, nonprofit organizations, government, ultimate customers, intermediate customers, functional departments, employees, and business units.⁴⁶ Copulsky & Wolf⁴⁷ suggested that “relationship marketing combines elements of general advertising, sales promotion, public relations, and direct marketing to create more effective and more efficient ways of reaching”. It also incorporates three key elements: identifying and building of current and potential customer databases, delivering differentiated messages to customers, and tracking and monitoring customer relationships. Relationship marketing has been defined by Jackson⁴⁸ as “marketing oriented toward strong, lasting relationships with individual accounts”. Firms are likely to be rewarded with strong and lasting customer relationships. According to Gronroos,⁴⁹ relationship marketing is to “identify and establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met”.

Relationship marketing is more than being competitive and it is about delivering more value and benefits to customers.⁵⁰ It can, according to Berry and Parasuraman,⁵¹ be divided into three levels: (1) using financial incentives to attract customers to purchase products and services relating to medical tourism; (2) using a combination of financial incentives and social bonding to develop and maintain customer trust and brand loyalty in the relationship; and (3) creating and building competitive advantage that is not easily imitable and the aim is to provide non-replicable products and services to medical tourists. In other words, it offers an alternative strategy to invest in, for example, IT and customer relationship system based on the collaborative involvement among the travel agencies, healthcare organizations, and medical tourists.^{52,53,54} These valuable IT investments need to be

carefully assessed and evaluated throughout the life of the products and services rendered in order to build competitive advantage by medical services providers as well as to provide additional benefits to medical tourists.^{51,55,56} By carefully adopting a relationship marketing strategy, one can obtain valuable customer information in order to develop long-term customer relationships and loyalty.⁵⁷

1.3. Research in Medical Tourism and Relationship Marketing

Due to advances in healthcare information technology, life expectancy in most countries has increased steadily over the years. Demographic changes are likely to impact on the patterns of travel demand, lifestyle, and the structure of societies.^{58,59} Despite developing strategic alliances among hospitals and healthcare centers, the inability of many healthcare systems to cope with the increased demand often leads to poor healthcare services, high costs, and long waiting lists.^{60,61,62,63,64} With the decrease in cross-border communication through the Internet (e.g., websites, emails) and cheaper air travel,^{65,66,67} many people are encouraged to seek alternatives to domestic health care by traveling abroad with the intention to access medical treatment. Smith and Forgione⁶⁸ identified several factors which influenced the patient’s choice of destination. Bookman and Bookman⁶⁹ came up with three types of medical tourism – invasive, diagnostic and lifestyle choice. Drawing on push-and-pull motivation theory, a case study was conducted by Ye et al.⁷⁰ to examine the barriers and motivations to medical tourism and had identified four groups of antecedents to perceived discrimination: cultural, employee, tourist, and situational factors. Caballero-Danell and Mugomba⁷¹ developed a market distribution model that describes all of the stakeholders involved as well as the components of the medical tourism market which includes consumer benefits, branding, infrastructure, the legal framework, products, communication channels, intermediaries, target markets, operators, and social issues.

Heung et al.⁷² had developed an integrated medical tourism model to describe the industry in terms of supply and demand. Some of the factors that impact the supply side of medical tourism include hospitals, clinics, private participation, public participation,

marketing strategy, community groups, international activities, certification and verification, communication, and language. Realizing the growing importance of medical tourism and the heavy investments in medical tourism by different stakeholders, the evaluation and identification of the critical factors influencing it need to be conducted.^{73,74,75} According to Lister,⁷⁶ WHO reported that healthcare and health treatments will be the world's largest industry while tourism will become the world's second largest industry by 2022. Harker and Egan⁷⁷ indicated that the scope, approaches, and applications of relationship marketing should be examined closely in order to understand the impact of relationship on the medical tourism industry. Hence, the aims of this study are to: (1) examine the relationship between the relationship marketing strategies and the medical tourism industry; and (2) help medical tourism operators to identify some of the key issues that exist within the industry.

2. Research Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were employed for this research.^{78,79,80,81} According to Burns,⁷⁸ semi-structured interviews are appropriate for descriptive research as they can assist in gaining deeper understanding of the relationship between the relationship marketing strategies and the medical tourism industry as well as in developing a framework which provides medical tourism operators with a more realistic insight in dealing with issues and challenges exist within the industry. Semi-structured interviews can also help to clarify doubts, ensure that the responses are properly understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions, and pick up nonverbal cues from the respondents.⁸² Moreover, an overall structure to the interviews is given by a number of specific questions set up by the researchers before the interviews. Within this broad structure the respondents are encouraged to talk about issues that seem of importance to them.^{78,83,84}

2.1. Data Collection

Before the semi-structured interviews were commenced, initial understanding of the relationship marketing and medical tourism was synthesized from the literature to provide an initial base for the study. In particular, the relationship marketing employed by medical tourism

travel agencies and health examination centers were examined. This research study focused on three relational bonding strategies for medical tourism: financial, social and structural bonds. Before semi-structured interviews were formally conducted, pilot interviews were conducted with senior medical tour guides in September 2014. These interviews were conducted to determine the scope of the study as well as to explore the respondents' understanding of each of the interview questions, their beliefs and feelings about the questions asked and any unintentional limitations in the range of questions asked or response choices available. In order to minimize the average interview length, some key questions were asked at random to any given medical tour guide. The average interview length was around 29.5 minutes.

Table 1. Profile of interview respondents

Respondents	Gender	Age	Number of Years Working as a Tour Guide
A	Male	38	15
B	Male	55	28
C	Male	47	20
D	Male	40	12
E	Male	29	6
F	Male	33	9
G	Male	63	35
H	Female	39	12
I	Male	55	16
J	Female	28	5

2.2. Data Analysis

Then, ten senior medical tour guides were randomly selected. A series of interviews were conducted with these senior medical tour guides to gain an overview of the relationship marketing strategies employed as well as key issues which exist within the medical tourism industry (see Table 1). Each interview usually lasted around 30 minutes and they were conducted between October 2014 and February 2015. All interviews were taped and the transcripts were sent to the respondents

for validation. In cases where there were differences in opinion between respondents, either follow-up interviews were conducted or emails were sent to clarify their positions. Questions asked during the semi-structured interviews were adapted from Peppers et al.²³. Main interview questions are listed in Table 2.

The qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the interviews to enhance the construct validity, reliability and overall quality of the qualitative data.^{79,83} During the analysis process, the researcher compared and contrasted the findings with the literature, taking into account both the positive and negative findings. Questions relating to a particular research theme, for example, various financial bonding strategies, were examined as a cluster. Furthermore, tracing the conclusions to the interview data was maintained as the chain of evidence.

Table 2. Main interview questions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was your main motivation for being a medical tour guide? • What was the main source of information for medical tour products? • What would you like to know about information related to medical tours? • How much do you know about the demands for medical tours? • How did you feel about the quality of medical service provided for medical tours? • What was your impression of the external surroundings and internal facilities of the health examination centers/hospitals? • What do you think about the reputation of and services provided by doctors within the health examination centers/hospitals? • How much do you know about the relationship marketing strategies (e.g., financial, social, structural etc.) used by health examination centers? • How much do the opinions of medical tourists and health examination centers/hospitals influence you? • How did the medical tourists feel after undergoing health examination? • Will you be sharing their experience with others? • Will you be organizing other medical tours in the future?
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2.3. Research Framework

As mentioned earlier, one major objective of this study is to examine the relationship between the relationship marketing strategies and the medical tourism industry. One key aspect of relationship marketing is for companies to establish one-to-one relationship with their customers.⁸⁵ The other important element of relationship marketing is to collect, build, and manage

customer demographics and consumption behavior database via the use of IS/IT.⁸⁶ As pointed out by Berry⁸⁷, relationship marketing can assist enterprises to maximize the profit. This study defines relationship marketing as activities that establish and maintain long-term customer relationship and groups it into the following three relational bonding strategies: financial, social, and structural bonds (Table 3).

Table 3. Relational bonding strategies and operational definitions

Strategies	Operational Definitions	Projects
Financial	Enhance customer loyalty through pricing incentives	1. Unique product demand 2. Product innovation 3. Normal website design 4. Normal appointment process
Social	Develop relationships through interpersonal interactions, friendships, and identifications	5. Normal consultation process 6. Normal appeal process 7. Products which meet customer needs 8. Comfortable surroundings
Structural	Retain customers by providing valuable services that are not available from other sources	9. Facilities which meet the customer needs

3. Results and Discussions

As mentioned earlier, this research study focused on three relational bonding strategies for medical tourism: financial, social and structural bonds. Each of these three strategies has some degree of influence on the relationships between medical tour guides, customers, and health examination centers.

3.1. Financial Bonds

Financial means have been used to attract customers and build customer relationship. Customers are often tied to the companies primarily through financial incentives, for example, lower prices for customers who have been with the company a long time. Some common financial strategies used by medical travel agencies include providing the products or services at lower cost than competitors, offering special all-inclusive package discounts, and offering unique products or services that competitors are unable to imitate (Table 4).

Table 4. Relationship marketing: Financial bonding strategies

Bonds	Strategies and Incentives	Interview Respondents
Financial	Lower prices	A, C, F, G, H, I, J
	Special all-inclusive package discounts	B, E, F, K
	Unique and innovative products	C, D, H

Many medical travel agencies get their customers to purchase their products and services by offering lower prices than their competitors. As can be seen in Table 4, medical travel agencies and health examination centers often offer low cost products and services to attract customers when facing with fierce competition from their rivals. For example, Respondent C indicated: *“Not only our prices in Taiwan are 50% cheaper but we also offer faster turnaround time and better products and services than our rivals in mainland China. These are our main advantages.”* Most respondents stated that although the special all-inclusive package discounts and unique and innovative products were often offered by medical travel agencies and health examination centers, the low-price strategy was still the most-adopted strategy by all medical tourism operators.

3.2. Social Bonds

Table 5. Relationship marketing: Social bonding strategies

Bonds	Strategies and Incentives	Interview Respondents
Social	Sales by mass marketing	B, C, G, H, I
	Phone calls by sales representatives	A, D, F
	Word of mouth marketing and advertising	B, E, F
	Visits to friends	F, H
	Personal charisma	J

The social bonds relate to customer services more than the financial bonds. The results from the interviews suggest that the strategies and incentives used by the travel agencies and health examination centers included the followings: sales by mass marketing, phone calls by sales representatives, word of mouth marketing and

advertising, personal charisma, and visits to friends (Table 5).

As can be seen in Table 5, sales by mass marketing is the most popular social bonding strategy adopted by the medical travel agencies and health examination centers. Respondent B stated that *“Mass marketing has been used because the potential medical tourists can come from groups made up of multiple demographics.”* The other two popular marketing strategies used by the travel agencies and health examination centers are phone calls by sales representatives and word of mouth marketing and advertising. For example, Respondent F said that: *“It is important for us to adopt proactive sales techniques by, for instance, scheduling appointments to share innovative products and services with our past/potential customers as well as making sure to include the ways that our customers can benefit from these products and services.”*

The results also show that word of mouth marketing and advertising techniques did work well for the respondents. For example, word of mouth or referrals are among the top ways by the travel agencies and health examination centers got leads and new customers. This can be done by making sure that the customers know about all the innovative products and services offered by the travel agencies and health examination centers. The other technique mentioned by the respondents are building a friendship or relationship with the customers and listening to their needs.

3.3. Structural Bonds

Table 6. Relationship marketing: Structural bonding strategies

Bonds	Strategies and Incentives	Interview Respondents
Structural	Comprehensive personalized medical services and care	B, C, F, H, I
	Brand appeal	F, H, I
	Inter-industry partnerships	A, D, I
	Follow-up calls after sales	F, H, G
	VIP cards	B, E
	Online doctor consultation services	A, J
	Resource integration among affiliated companies	C

In addition to building financial and social bonds, it is also important to create long-term and stable structural bonds between the companies and their customers. Structural bonds are created by providing personalized services to customers and this in turn, has the potential to create competitive advantages for the companies. The results from the interviews suggest that the strategies and incentives used by the travel agencies and health examination centers included the followings: comprehensive personalized medical services and care, inter-industry partnerships, VIP cards, resource integration among affiliated companies, follow-up calls after sales, online doctor consultation services, and brand appeal (Table 6).

Often, saving money is not enough for medical tourists. They look for the comprehensive personalized medical services and care which they do not get from the healthcare system in their own countries. In other words, medical tourists often want to make the experience as easy as possible by looking for the comprehensive medical package (e.g., housing and travel arrangements, pre-op planning, and scheduling and follow-up for post-op care). For example, Respondent I revealed that: *"I sat down face to face with representatives from travel agencies and health examination centers to discuss our customers' medical needs. It would be great if they are able to present a comprehensive personalized medical service and care program that would suit our customers' needs."* As stated by several respondents, medical tourists' needs are not limited to the product itself but also other services such as travel and housing arrangements. In other words, they are looking for medical tourism operators that are able to provide the medical concierge service. The other important consideration is the brand appeal. Respondent F said that: *"Customers usually prefer travel agencies and health examination centers with good brand images and appeal. This makes them feel more secure and comfortable."*

The three bonds (i.e., financial, social and structural) of relationship marketing discussed earlier were important to connect the customers closer to the medical tourism operators as well as to gain sustained competitive advantages. At the lowest level, the travel agencies and health examination centers were able to attract customers by offering financial benefits and incentives such as lower prices than their competitors, special all-inclusive package discounts, and unique and

innovative products. They were easiest to implement but they did not generally provide long term advantages. The social bonds had stronger binding than the financial bonds but its strategies and incentives were more difficult to implement. The strategies and incentives adopted by the travel agencies and health examination centers included: sales by mass marketing, phone calls by sales representatives, word of mouth marketing and advertising, visits to friends, and personal charisma. Although this type of bonding was more difficult for the competitors to imitate than the financial strategies and incentives, it would not bind the customers permanently to the travel agencies and health examination centers. At the highest level, strategies and incentives under the structural bonds were the hardest to implement. The success of establishing structural bonds was dependent on delivering a desirable service solution to the medical tourists. Rather than simply building customer relationships in the financial and social bonding phases, structural bonds were created in the form of service-delivery systems (e.g., personalized medical concierge service) to medical tourists. This would enable medical tourism operators not only to consolidate their relationships with medical tourists but also to develop long-term competitive advantages.

4. Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

4.1. Results and Contribution to the Literature

In the face of aggressive global competitors, travel agencies and health examination centers need to formulate various strategies and incentives to build long-term customer relationships as well as to gain sustained competitive advantages. The findings of this research suggest that relationship marketing alone is not a panacea. Other factors such as careful attention and evaluation of its effects on medical tourism and the associated IT investments may be needed to ensure success.^{60,88,89} Despite this, relationship marketing is one of the crucial factors which had an impact on the willingness of the tour guides to make necessary travel arrangements for medical tourists. Based on the literature review and the results from the case studies, there are several important lessons for travel agencies and health examination centers. Face with increasingly ferocious market competition, travel agencies and health examination centers need to develop their own core competencies and business strategies. These will not only provide them with constant revenue but also enable

them to gain a competitive advantage via creating innovative market differentiation and integration strategies.

The findings of this research are consistent with much of the medical tourism literature.^{1,2,3,4,5,14,34} The other critical factors for medical tourists to consider before making the decision to travel to Taiwan to seek health treatments are: the professional image of its doctors, the environment of health examination center, and the ability of its doctors to diagnose a patient's condition. These factors can also potentially have significant impact on the effectiveness of the relationship marketing on medical tourism as well as the efforts in making subsequent trips to the health examination centers.

4.2. Managerial and Practical Implications

The research also provides insights into the importance of three relational bonding strategies for medical tourism. These three strategies have some degree of influence on the relationships between medical tour guides, customers, and health examination centers. These three strategies are: financial, social and structural bonds. Financial means can be used to build customer relationship and to attract new customers. Some of the usual financial strategies used by medical tourism operators include offering special all-inclusive package discounts to potential medical tourists, offering unique products and services that competitors cannot imitate, and providing the products at lower cost than their competitors. General speaking, the low-price strategy was still the most-adopted strategy by all medical tourism operators.

The ability to utilize social and interpersonal bonds is also crucial for the medical tourism operators. The results reveal that targeted relationship marketing is the most popular strategy adopted by the medical tourism operators. The other two popular marketing strategies are word of mouth marketing and advertising and phone calls by sales representatives. The other technique mentioned by the respondents are building a friendship or relationship with the customers and listening to their needs.

Structural bonds are not easily replaceable as they often contain information and knowledge about personalized products and services that are expensive for customer to terminate. As such, they have the potential to create competitive advantages for the

medical tourism operators. In addition to saving money, medical tourists often look for the comprehensive personalized medical products and services that they do not get from their own domestic healthcare systems. They want to make their own experience as smooth as possible by taking out comprehensive medical packages. Moreover, medical tourists' needs are not only limited to the particular products but also other services such as travel and housing arrangements. They are looking for medical tourism operators that are able to provide the medical concierge service.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations have to be acknowledged in this study. Due to time and financial constraints, only ten senior medical tour guides were interviewed for this research. It was also difficult to persuade senior medical tour guides to participate in this research because of privacy considerations. The relatively small sample may not fully capture the complex nature of the factors affecting the effectiveness of the relationship marketing on medical tourism. In addition, the effectiveness of these factors on medical tourism (e.g., the environment of health examination center and phone calls by sales representatives) do not remain static. Further research can take a longitudinal approach as other factors and drivers affecting the success of medical tourism are likely to change over time.

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