

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICE OF VETERINARY SERVICE

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Abstract

Increasing competition among health care service providers for pets and constantly growing requirements for the veterinary service quality, force veterinary service providers to search for some possibilities to remain competitive in the market in order to meet both customer needs and expectations, and animal needs best. The aim of the research is – having identified the choice motives for animal health care service, to enumerate the factors, influencing the choice of veterinary service. In order to find the pet keepers' approach concerning the factors, influencing the choice of veterinary service, a pilot research was completed. According to the gained primary data results in the research, it was found that the key factors, influencing the choice of veterinary service are as follows: the service quality of health care, the recommendation of the person responsible for animal care and the price for the delivered service.

Key words: veterinary service, veterinary service provider, customer approach, factors.

Introduction

Currently, in the veterinary sector there are predominant complex and intensive changes, which have some influence on the competitive environment of veterinary service. First, because of the increase in the number of pet health care service providers (Lowe, 2009) and the decrease of veterinary service providers in rural areas (Jensen *et al.*, 2009; Villarroel *et al.*, 2009), as well as the decrease in graduates' opportunities to get employed and entrenched in the labor market (AVMA, 2013), the competition among veterinary service providers, delivering this service, is increasing rapidly.

Another challenge for the veterinary service providers is the constantly growing requirements for the veterinary service quality, changing customer needs, increasing animal owners' insistence for veterinary service providers and all this makes the veterinary service providers search for some possibilities to remain competitive in the market in order to meet both the customer needs and expectations and animal needs best.

It should be highlighted that animal health care service is specific. Differently from human health care, in the animal health care there are distinguished two separate subjects – customer (animal owner) and patient (animal). Veterinary service is provided to animals and the customer is a service purchaser (Ašmenskaitė & Astromskienė, 2015). It should also be emphasized that health care service has to meet not only customer and animal needs, but they also has to comply with clinical standards.

As it has been noted in the literature lately, during the provision of service to customers by veterinary physicians there is predominant insufficient satisfaction of customer needs (Kaler & Green, 2013), distrust to personal abilities and knowledge with the purpose to meet the customer needs (Roshier & McBride, 2013). Besides, there have been indicated

significant differences between pet owner and vet approaches, assessing 'a good vet' qualities (Mellanby *et al.*, 2011). As Lowe (2009) underlines, for veterinary service providers it is a must to improve relationship with farmers, i.e. service receivers. According to the author, farmers insist on veterinary service, which comply with their wider business needs (Lowe, 2009). Lloyd, Harris, & Marrinan (2005) states that in order to maintain the long-lasting relationship with customer, efficient communication with animal owners is one of the assessment indicators of the animal health care service quality. According to Felsted (2012), veterinarians have to pay more attention to the communication of service value to their customers. An animal owner has a right to expect that some attention will be paid to his/her expectations and needs, and as a result the attention to customer as a personality and to his/her animal's problems is a required and very important part for the veterinary service provider's work.

The satisfaction of the veterinary service receivers with the provided veterinary service and the factors facilitating the following that veterinary service providers could foresee animal owners' behavioral peculiarities, is quite a new issue that is little investigated by Lithuanian scientists. The following reveals that the research in veterinary service is carried out assessing it in terms of veterinary medicine approach.

There has been little research conducted by foreign scientists on the given topic. A study of public expectations (MG&A, 2014), carried out by Royal Veterinary College, revealed that it is possible to distinguish the criteria, which have influence on the choice of a veterinary service provider. The key choice factors concerning a veterinary service provider, distinguished by the veterinary service receivers, were the following: territorial convenience (distance to the veterinary service provider), following of professional

standards and personal experience of the service reception. It is worth paying attention to the fact that customer expectations, when choosing a veterinary service provider, differ. Horse owners were likely to reach the veterinary service provider present in a farther distance and pay for the provided service more in comparison to pet owners.

The study, completed in Austria, showed (1285 respondents participated in the survey) that the most significant criteria in the choice of a veterinary physician are the following: friendliness and veterinary physician's consultation and professionalism (competence) (Energy marketing, 2004). It should be stressed that the service price criterion was the least meaningful in the choice of a veterinary physician.

Under the order of the Polish Small Animal Veterinary Association, the Public Relations Agency carried out a study with the aim to indicate the need satisfaction possibilities for dog owners, purchasing the veterinary service. The study results revealed that the most significant motives when choosing the veterinary service provider, are the following: convenient and easily reachable place (54%), veterinary service provider's competence (50%), price (41%) and the range of the provided service (19%) (Walczak, 2012).

The aim of the research – having identified the motives for the choice of animal health care service, to enumerate the factors, influencing the choice of veterinary service.

Materials and Methods

In order to identify the motives for the choice of animal health care service and enumerate the factors, influencing the choice of veterinary service, there was completed a pilot research. In terms of the research completion, for the collection of data the written survey method was used. The data were collected from October to November, 2015.

For the completion of the survey a two-part questionnaire was prepared. The first part contained questions concerning the researched social-demographic data (gender, age, education and income) and the second part – questions with the aim to research the factors that influence the pet owners' choice of the veterinary service.

For the research the non-probability sampling method – convenience sampling - was chosen. It means that there were surveyed those who could be reached most easily. The target research population involved pet owners, who had used animal health care service. The sample, selected for the following research involved different age groups, exceptionally over the age of 18.

During the completion of the research 400 questionnaires were disseminated; 376 of them were

returned, out of them the correctly filled ones were selected. Statistical data analysis was completed applying the software package: IBM SPSS Statistics (21.0 v.). The following methods of statistical analysis were applied: descriptive statistics; and for the assessment of differences related to the statistical significance the nonparametric *chi* square (χ^2) criterion was applied.

Results and Discussion

The majority of the respondents who participated in the research were 18-24 (53.2%) old. There participated more women than men (respectively 81.9% and 18.1%). The greater part of the researched had the higher education of university type or non-completed higher education (53.2%), and almost a quarter – secondary (24.5%), and the least part were those with the advanced vocational education and training (9.6%). During the analysis of the respondent distribution according to the residential area, it was found that more than a half of respondents (69.1%) reside in cities and the remaining 31.6% – in villages. Most respondents (31.9%) indicated that their income was 301- 400 EUR per month, 19.1% of respondents indicated that their income was 401-500 EUR, 30.5% selected the lowest income group – up to 300 EUR, and 8.5% of respondents indicated the highest income group of 701 EUR and more.

First, under the research it was sought to find out the frequency of respondents' visit at the veterinary service provider during the last two years. Over the last two years most pet owners had used the animal health care service at least once. More than a half of respondents (61.7%) indicated that they with their pet visited the veterinary physician 2-5 times, and 20.2% of the surveyed visited the veterinary physician more than 5 times. 18.1% of pet owners had visited the veterinary doctor once during the last two years.

There was indicated statistically significant differences between the frequency of pet owners' visit/attendance and the choice of the veterinary service provider. Most respondents who have a personal veterinary physician first indicated that they have used the animal health care service more than 6 times (Table 1).

During the analysis of the visit/attendance number to a veterinary service provider for one pet owner in two years it was found that on average during the last two years one service receiver had visited the veterinary service provider 4 times. It was also found that women (on average 4.0 times, $p=0.087$) and village residents (on average 4.1 times, $p=0.001$) together with pets more often visited veterinary service providers.

It was found that the number of visits differ depending on the choice of an animal health care provider. Pet owners, who do not have their personal

Table 1

The links between the frequency of pet owners' attendance/visit to the veterinary service provider and the choice of the veterinary service provider, %

Veterinary service provider	Attendance/visit frequency at the veterinary service provider		
	Once	2-5 times	More than 6 times
Ones, who have chosen a personal veterinary service provider	13.2	60.3	26.5
Ones, who have not chosen a personal veterinary service provider	30.8	65.4	3.8

$\chi^2=32.158$, $df=2$, $p=0.000$

veterinary physician, visited animal health care providers more often than those who had chosen the personal veterinary service provider (on average 4.3 times, $p<0.003$). Thus, there can be drawn a conclusion that pet owners do not trust the veterinary service provider and/or the quality of their provided service and, as a result they apply to another service provider expecting a better service quality. The attention should be paid to the fact that pet owners' distrust and disappointment can cause situations when a veterinary service provider starts behaving not as a person responsible for animal health care, but as a businessman. Trust is a very significant aspect for the relationship between service providers (animal health care service providers) and people, using service (pet owners). According to Grand *et al.* (2013), trust in veterinarians is related to professionalism, respectful communication and an ability to deliver information concerning animal diagnostics, treatment methods and treatment prognosis in an open manner and honestly. Consequently, it can be stated that interpersonal relationship between the veterinary service provider and animal owner is impossible with no trust.

Pet owners may apply to any animal health care service provider who provides service and get the necessary help for the pet. Most pet owners who participated in the research (72.3%) indicated that they have a personal veterinary physician who they apply to first in case of animal health problem presence, and only 27.7% of pet owners do not have a veterinary physician and in case of necessity they apply to that animal health care provider who is the most convenient for them. No significant differences between gender, place of residence, age and income were identified. It was determined that the choice of a health care service provider depends on education ($\chi^2=30.815$, $df=4$, $p=0.000$).

The research revealed that the majority of all the surveyed (69.1%) applied to a veterinary service provider because of a dog's health condition, 27.7% – because of a cat's health condition. The minor part (3.2%) of respondents indicated that their animal kind is another, i.e. they applied to the veterinary physician because of exotic mammals' health disorders. No

significant differences between the respondents' gender, age, income education and the most popular kinds of animals were found. The research showed that 47.9% of respondents keep one animal and almost a third (29.8%) keep two pets, 12.8% – 4 and more pets. A trend can be observed that the more pets are kept, the weaker the relationship between the human and animal is.

It should be stressed that it is not sufficient to analyze the demand for animal health care service, based on the statistical change in pet numbers. Analyzing the service demand for animal health care, the regularity of the pet owner visits to a veterinary physician, is particularly significant. The research revealed that almost a half of pet owners (38.3%) visit the veterinary service provider with their pet on a regular basis, and the fifth - irregularly. A third (39.4%) of pet owners indicated that they visit the veterinary service provider very seldom, (i.e. one time totally, one time in 2 years, in the case of the animal's health disorder). No statistically significant differences between the regularity of pet owners' visits and the animal kind have been detected. A presumption can be made that animal owners' behavior and knowledge about animal health care influence the regularity of visits with an animal to a veterinary physician. The results of the study, completed in the USA, showed that the average number of pet owners' visits to a vet was decreasing (Brakke Consulting, 2011). We have distinguished the factors that influence the more seldom visits/attendance to a veterinary service provider: 1) expensive animal health care service is not affordable for pet owners due to its price, 2) pet owners are likely to use the Internet and search for information related to pet health issues – all this has a great influence on the pet owners' decision to visit/attend an animal health care provider more seldom. Scientists draw attention to the fact that the most significant factor influencing the frequency of visits/attendance to a veterinary service provider is a predominant 'false attitude' among most pet owners that regular pet health check-up is not necessary.

The respondents were also asked to indicate the person who takes care of the animal. 42.6% of animal

owners indicated that they take care of their pet. A third of respondents (31.9%) indicated that not only the animal owner takes care of it, but also a spouse/partner. Others pointed out that other family members take care of animals (23.4%). A presumption can be drawn that animal care takes a lot of time, thus it is likely to be shared with other family members and relatives.

In the recent years, more and more attention is being paid to the human and animal emotional relationship that is very significant to human interrelationship (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Bustad & Hines, 1984; Melson, 2003; Serpel, 1999; Šinkariova, Gudonis, & Trakūnaitė, 2008; Tannenbaum, 1985). Human-animal relationship is defined as mutually useful and dynamic human and animal relation that involves the behavior, necessary for both subjects' health and welfare (AVMA, 1998). The following involves emotional, psychological and physical intercourse between a human, animal and environment. A veterinary physician, as a person responsible for animal health care should play a role in human-animal relationship: by aiding the strengthening of the potential of a human-animal relationship. It is universally acknowledged that for a veterinary physician it is useful to know the animal importance in human life, health and welfare (Fraser, 1989; Ormerod, 2008; Timmins, 2008), euthanasia which is related to human and animal feelings of loss (Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003; Gerwolls & Labbott, 1994; Morris, 2012; Smith, 2012; Weisman, 1991) and about the security of animal welfare (Marder & Duxbury, 2008; Wensley, 2008). The research results have revealed that 73.4% of pet owners keep an animal together with a family member, 23.4% with a friend and only 3.2% indicated that they consider their pet being an animal or work object. Having completed the study in the human and pet relationship, Rislely-Curtisso, Holley, & Wolf, (2006) identified that 97% of pet owners, the majority of which had a dog, consider their animal being their family member. Blacwell (2001) provides similar research data and indicates that 85% of pet owners consider their animal being a family member.

Applying to veterinary service providers, pet owners have their expectations. Veterinary physicians also have a distinctive attitude towards their work duties during the consultation and want to provide the pet owners with a high-quality service. It is very important to estimate if physician and customer expectations are similar as this might have an impact on the usage of the consultation time and the assessment of the service quality. During the research it was sought to find out the reasons for the pet owner application to a veterinary service provider. The respondents could mark all the answer variants suitable for them. During the research there proved to

be two key reasons for the application to an animal health care provider – pet disease / health problems (83.0%) or pet vaccination (69.1%) (Figure 1).

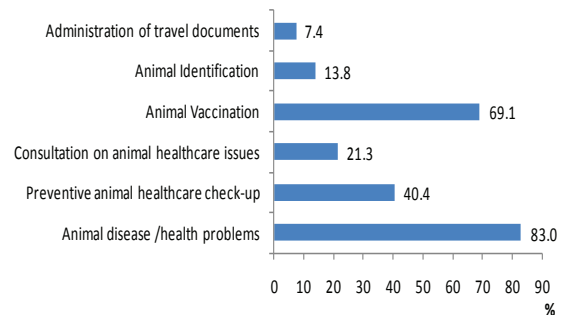


Figure 1. Key reasons for the application to an animal health care service provider.

Volk *et al.* (2011) also identified that only 32% of pet owners considered the necessity visiting a veterinary service provider due to preventive aims, and 36% indicated that it is necessary to apply to a veterinary service provider only for a pet vaccination. On the basis of the following data, a conclusion can be drawn that this determines the decreasing visit/attendance frequency to a veterinary service provider in the recent years (Felsted, 2011). An assumption can be made that animal owners insufficiently comprehend the values of preventive animal health care service.

It has to be stressed that the animal registration and identification obligation is regulated by the Law on Welfare and Protection of Animals in the Republic of Lithuania. Following the above mentioned law, pets (dogs, cats and ferrets) have to be registered and identified. The research results revealed that only 13.8% include the reason related to the pet owners' application to an animal health care service provider for the pet identification. It was determined that the pet owners who are at a younger age (18-24 years) used the pet identification service ($\chi^2=30.685$, $df=4$, $p=0.000$).

The veterinary service receiver has an opportunity to choose the service provider. It is considered that the choice of a veterinary service provider depends on the veterinary service receiver's satisfaction with his/her consultation. Thus it is important for animal health care providers to be aware of the choice criteria because that might help them meet the pet owner's expectations.

Having completed the research, it was determined that the majority of respondents estimated the choice of the criteria for animal health care as significant (Table 2). 97.7% of animal owners indicated that the most significant motive for the choice of a veterinary service provider, was the quality of health care service,

Table 2

Respondent distribution according to the choice of an animal health care service provider, %

Criteria	Not important	Partially important	Important
Service range	7.4	27.7	64.9
Convenient location	14.7	21.3	67.0
Other customers' recommendations	5.3	30.9	63.8
Recommendations of the persons responsible for animal care	10.6	12.8	76.6
Acceptable price for the delivered service	7.4	18.1	74.5
Service quality	1.1	1.1	97.7

63.8% – the recommendations of other persons responsible for animal care, and 74.5% – the price for the delivered service.

In order for the pet owners to apply to service providers, they should have some information about the service provider and the delivered service. Having completed the research, it was determined that 73.4% of pet owners indicated the veterinary physician being as one of the key information sources. Pet owners indicated that they search for the information related to animal health care in the periodical press and informative publications least. Although the social network *Facebook* has turned into the most actively used social network in the whole Europe and the USA during quite a short time (Carlsson, 2012; Li & Sun 2014; Akin & Akin, 2015), however, only 21.3% of respondents search for the information of the following pattern in the social network *Facebook*. The pet owners, who participated in the survey, chose friends and acquaintances, the Internet media and the veterinary service provider's website as information resources (see Figure 2).

Having analyzed the research data it was determined the information presented on the veterinary service provider's website is the most frequently used by the respondents with secondary education ($\chi^2=36.842$,

$df=4$, $p=0.000$). The respondents with non-completed higher education indicated periodical press being as the most significant source of information ($\chi^2=54.339$, $df=4$, $p=0.000$). There has also been noticed a trend that the respondents at a younger age (18-24) had indicated the social network *Facebook* as the most significant source of information concerning animal health care service ($\chi^2=15.503$, $df=4$, $p=0.004$). It should be emphasized that animal health care service providers have to know where their customers get information concerning their pet diseases and their behavior in case of diseases and if that information is secure, as well as to inform customers about the best sources of information.

Summarizing the research results it can be stated that when a need for pet health care service emerges – it is applied for or used. The key motives, influencing the choice of veterinary service are the quality of animal health care service, the recommendations of the persons responsible for animal care and the price for the delivered service.

Conclusions

1. The research in the choice motives for veterinary service providers offers valuable information concerning pet owner needs and expectations that

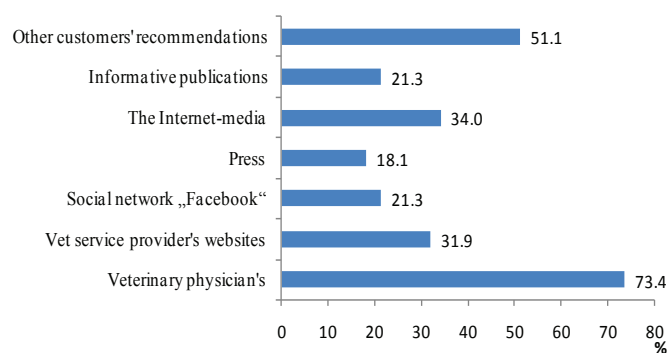


Figure 2. Key information search resources based on animal health care service.

- can be used by the veterinary service providers for the design of the value proposal. It is a required condition for each veterinary service provider's competitiveness.
2. The majority of pet owners applied to a veterinary service provider concerning a dog or cat health condition. Almost a half of the pet owners visit the veterinary service providers with their pets on a regular basis, and the fifth irregularly. The major part of the pet owners has a personal veterinary physician, who they apply to first in case of present animal's health problems. The pet owners who do not have a personal veterinary physician visited an animal health care provider more often than ones who have chosen him/her.
 3. It is purposeful for veterinary service providers to identify the human-animal relationship. The application of the human-animal relationship makes presumptions for the creation of trust between a customer and veterinary service provider and might provide some information concerning the customer. It was determined that the major part of the pet owners consider an animal their family member, and only 3.5% indicated that they consider their pet an animal or work object.
 4. The key reasons for the application to an animal health care provider – pet disease/health problems or pet vaccination. The motive for veterinary service provider's choice by the pet owners involves the quality of the animal health care service, recommendations of the persons responsible for animal care, and the price for the delivered service.
 5. The greater majority of pet owners indicated the veterinary physician being one of the key information sources about the provided animal health care service. The pet owners search for the information related to the animal health care service in periodical press and sources of information least. The choice of information sources by pet owners depends on education. Persons with secondary or non-completed higher education chose the Internet media and the veterinary service provider's website as a source of information more frequently.

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