

Analysis of the Perception of Financial-Accounting Services Providers on Customer Relations

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to identify the perception of the managers of financial-accounting service providers in Romania regarding customer relations as well as other relevant aspects in order to provide evidence of improving the activities and these relations. Using the focus group technique, we analyzed the managers' perception of financial-accounting services firms in Bacau regarding the activity and the relations with their clients through in-depth interviews. Our obtained results argue that an important factor in meeting the needs of the managers regarding the quality of the financial-accounting services is the responsibility of the specialized financial-accounting service providers willing to contribute to the creation of a better framework and a better climate of the relations between the client and specialized financial-accounting services. Moreover, we have found that Romanian taxation and bureaucracy slow down the financial and accounting activity of financial-accounting service providers and reduces the time spent on communicating with customers in order to perform economic analyzes of the economic activity of the business, which could add value. We have also identified other important factors regarding the efficiency of the relationship between financial-accounting services providers and their customers.*

Keywords: *Financial Consulting Services, Focus Group*

Introduction

In the academic, scientific, technical and professional environment, consulting activity is omnipresent and has political, social, economic and cultural connotations that in many situations interfere, influencing each other in the area of competence.

The new architecture of the phenomena and processes specific to the field of consultancy in general and the financial-accounting consultancy in particular required the carrying out of marketing researches observing the behaviors and opinions of the managers of the companies regarding the offer of the companies providing specialized financial-accounting services from the North-East region of Romania.

The need for qualitative analysis is based on the understanding of the requirements and expectations of the specialized financial-accounting services providers in relations with the beneficiaries of these services. In order to carry out the analysis efficiently, we started from its rigorous planning, together with the completion of the necessary research tools, namely the selection questionnaire of the potential respondents and the list of themes and sub-themes that need to be addressed in the semi-directive profound interview. Thus, in order to study in detail the perceptions and expectations of managers of specialized financial-accounting services regarding customer relations; we used focus group as qualitative research method.

Focus group is a technique that involves applying in-depth group interviews, to a selected group based on specific criteria, demonstrating the relevance of their views on the subject. In general, participants in focus group have relatively close age, similar features [4], [8] and can be comfortable in discussing the subject with both the moderator and the other participants of the group. [7] Moreover, the selection of the focus group participants also takes into account their knowledge of the subject in order to apply the results obtained. [1]

The main advantage of focus group use is its ability to generate data based on the synergy of group interaction. [3] That is why it is extremely important for focus group participants to feel comfortable in discussing the subject to both the moderator and each other. [6]

This paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the perception of financial-accounting service providers, with more than 20 years of experience in financial and accounting services, on the factors influencing the relations between financial-accounting services and clients. Thus, we consider that this paper is important for companies providing financial-accounting services in order to increase the efficiency of the relationship with clients. As well as for the beneficiaries of financial-accounting services in order to obtain tax and financial consultancy, economic analysis regarding the company's activity, business opportunities, quality service assurance, transfer of responsibility for financial, accounting and tax issues, in order to avoid inspections of the control bodies and even fines.

The paper is structured as follows: The second section presents the data used in this paper and the methodological aspects, the third section details the results obtained and the fourth section provides the conclusions.

1. Methodological Aspects

In preparing the selection questionnaire, we include some questions that would lead to the identification of representative subjects, namely managers of financial-accounting services firms, according to the focus group technique [6].

The list of themes and sub-themes that were dealt with during their-depth interview is presented in table no. 1.

Table no. 1. The list of themes and sub-themes of the in-depth interview

<i>1. About the specialized financial-accounting services market</i>
1.1.The importance and role of specialized financial-accounting services in the economy
1.2.The evolution and structure of the specialized financial-accounting services in Bacau
1.3.The factors on which supply and demand of specialized financial-accounting services depend
<i>2. Opinions on costs involved in the production and communication of financial-accounting information</i>
2.1.About the cost of human resources in performing the accounting service
2.2.Costs of information resources and storage information
2.3. Considerations on cost benefit assessment in specialized financial-accounting services within contractual relations
<i>3. Managers' requirements and expectations regarding the delivery of specialized financial-accounting services in the current competitive environment, in an ideal situation</i>
3.1.Outline an image of the ideal provider and costumer of specialized financial-accounting services
3.2.Customer behavior in performing specialized financial-accounting services in a perfect collaboration
3.3.The ideal management of the accounting firm regarding the needs of clients, now and in the future
3.4. Factors that can lead to changing the role of professional accountant and ideal collaboration with the client
3.5. The possible benefits that customers can benefit from an ideal collaboration with specialized financial-accounting services
<i>4. Restrictive factors regarding publicity of contractual relations with financial-accounting services costumers</i>
4.1.Potential barriers of the specialized financial-accounting service provider in entering a market
4.2. Factors that actually prevent fair promotion of supplier-beneficiary relationship with specialized financial-accounting services
4.3. The relationship between ethics and the quality of professional accountant
4.4. Legislative restrictions that generate unwanted changes in financial-accounting activities
<i>5. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction degree regarding the collaboration with current clients</i>
5.1. Contractual relations with customers and satisfaction/dissatisfaction degree
5.2. Concern about defining customer relations (close, impersonal, friendly)
5.3. Features of long-lasting collaboration relations with partner firms

Source: Author's computation

As we can see in table no. 1, we conducted in-depth interviews structured on five main themes, each theme being structured in subjects that segment the main theme.

All the interviews were audio recorded, given the homogeneity of the group of professional accountants and the fact that the participants are well familiar in the professional training and other occasions, which offered a comfortable setting, it was decided that video recording is not necessary.

The analysis of the information gathered through the in depth interview was based on the content analysis, a specific method of analyzing the qualitative data.

The size of the sample was initially established at 12 subjects according to the criteria that ensure homogeneity, good reputation, adequate professional training, relevant experience in relation to the research topic, with the same profession and the same level of education from different backgrounds (urban and rural), criteria taken in accordance with the literature in the field. [5], [8]

Subjects were selected from the list of accounting experts listed in the Body of Expert Accountants and Authorized Accountants of Romania - CECCAR, Bacau Branch, in accordance with the methodological requirements of the literature. [8], [7], [1]

From the list of 12 people invited, 10 of them answered the invitation, two people for different reasons stated that they could not attend the scheduled date and time, having other appointments. The number of subjects is the optimal number for a focus group. [6]

The Focus Group was held at the Body of Expert Accountants and Authorized Accountants of Romania -Bacau Branch, at the Ion Ionescu de la Brad Hall, where the professional training of certified accountants is held in Bacau County, with 50 seats and audio and video recording.

The sample composed of accounting experts from urban and rural areas, dispersed in Bacau as follows:

Table no. 2 Structure of the research sample

Respondent	Dispersion within Bacau	Professional experience -years-	Age years	Studies	Specialization
1	Vultureni Village	25	60	higher education	Accountant Expert
2	Bacau City	40	70	higher education	Accountant Expert and Evaluator
3	Comanesti City	28	58	higher education	Accountant Expert, and Financial Auditor
4	Bacau City	30	65	higher education	Accountant Expert, Evaluator and Financial Auditor
5	Darmanesti City	25	48	higher education	Accountant Expert
6	Onesti City	50	82	higher education	Accountant Expert, and Financial Auditor
7	PoduTurcului Village	24	55	higher education	Accountant Expert
8	Tirgu Ocna City	25	48	higher education	Accountant Expert
9	Onesti City	35	59	higher education	Accountant Expert
10	Moinesti City	26	61	higher education	Accountant Expert, and Financial Auditor

Source: Author's computation

The structure of the sample is composed of five women and five men, randomly selected from the urban and rural areas (8 urban and 2 rural respondents), age from 48 to 82, and experience in specialized financial-accounting services between 24 years and 50 years, the data is presented in table no. 2. Our group is homogeneous and is in accordance with other studies. [2], [6]

2. Results and Discussion

Based on the synthesis grid from the primary information obtained we conducted:

- Vertical analysis by approaching within the same interview the way in which each respondent handled the themes and subtopics of the in-depth interview;
- Horizontal analysis by reflecting how each theme and subtopic is approached by all respondents. This analysis is important because it is the basis of the qualitative study report.

Thus, in a first phase we present the importance given by the participants to the proposed themes, presented in table no. 2.

Table no. 3 The relative importance of managers' approaches to specialized financial-accounting services

Themes addressed	Proportion %
1. About the specialized financial-accounting services market	17.47
2. Opinions on costs involved in the production and communication of financial-accounting information	16.44
3. Managers' requirements and expectations regarding the delivery of specialized financial-accounting services in the current competitive environment, in an ideal situation	26.64
4. Restrictive factors regarding publicity of contractual relations with financial-accounting services costumers	21.80
5. Satisfaction/dissatisfaction degree regarding the collaboration with current clients	17.65
TOTAL	100.00

Source: Author's computation

We can see, from the table no. 3 that managers requirements and expectations regarding the delivery of specialized financial-accounting services in the current competitive environment, in an ideal situation represents the highest important theme, with 26.64% followed by restrictive factors regarding publicity of contractual relations with financial-accounting services costumers with 21.80%. We also found that the other three themes have a relatively similar importance and do not differ much from each other in this perspective.

The horizontal analysis of the interviews conducted with the providers of financial-accounting services using synthetic approach is as follows:

About the specialized financial-accounting services market theme

Regarding the importance and the role of specialized financial-accounting services, respondent no.4, as well as the rest of interviewed managers, believes that the importance of specialized financial-accounting services is indisputable, but not always in the business world these services have been seen with satisfaction, as they are cost generating. The fact that qualified people organize them accentuates their importance. Most managers agree that the issue under discussion is in some way suffocating by the implication of taxation in this activity.

The role and importance of specialized financial-accounting services is also set by taking responsibility for the public interest so that professional accountants can provide reliable and high-quality services in this interest.

Regarding the evolution and structure of the specialized financial-accounting services in Bacau, respondent no.3 and most of the respondents, agree on the following aspects: the specialized financial-accounting services market in Romania is a disorganized, unpredictable, dominated market of unfair competition practiced by the public sector through "shield companies" that are influenced from the top of the public sector.

Managers' requirements and expectations regarding the delivery of specialized financial-accounting services in the current competitive environment, in an ideal situation theme

The projection of the relation image regarding the ideal provider and financial-accounting services beneficiary requires the permanent involvement of the professional accountant in the activity of the client as for his own business. Permanent and continuous communication, collaboration between the specialized financial-accounting provider and the client based on trust, sincerity and respect, in accordance with the compatibility of the provider and the consumer of specialized financial-accounting services. The provider in this relation has the responsibility and mission to present to the consumer, based on his expertise, what he has to do in the future by knowing and analyzing past events, claims one of the respondents. This symbiosis can create a united team to support the economic agent and to support its information requests.

Respondent no. 2 resumes at the customer perceptions and behavior regarding specialized financial-accounting services, which, according also to the opinions of the majority of interviewed subjects, needs a change regarding the interest in understanding the professional accountant's efforts and in knowing its own business based on the analysis of accounting results.

Respondent no. 1 and the majority of focus group subjects, argued that the ideal behavior of the client should be based on mutual respect, understanding, continuous communication, appreciation of the other's work, faithful execution of contractual clauses, consistency between words and actions as well as appropriate treatment regarding the relation.

Regarding the ideal management of the specialized financial-accounting service provider for the understanding of the clients' requirements, it is appreciated, by the majority of interviewees, that this involves the interest and patience for achieving the customer's economic education. Thus, the providers must support the correct use of information, transparency and communication of information, help in hiring the client only in activities that will increase his profit, ensuring a "minimum comfort" for him in order to handle the "legislative hasty".

Finally, respondent no.6 argues that an ideal collaboration between financial-accounting services provider and the consumer can generate a number of advantages for clients. Some of them are: competent advice they can benefit whenever needed, tax and financial consulting, economic analysis regarding the company's activity, business opportunities, guarantee of quality service, transfer of responsibility for financial and accounting issues and tax prevention by avoiding inspections of the control bodies and even fines.

Restrictive factors regarding publicity of contractual relations with financial-accounting services costumers

Respondent no. 8, argues that in the activity of providing specialized financial-accounting services, there are a series of barriers to market entry, argument supported by the majority of respondents. Some restrictions are regarding material nature, such as lack of adequate space and necessary facilities; others of a professional nature, such as unfair competition from "so-called low-priced professionals", that do not pay contribution, professional insurance, do not attend professional training courses annually and do not take responsibility for the executed service. It also highlighted the lack of unity in the accounting profession, the insufficient promotion of the professional accountant and the nonfulfillment of all the professional standards.

Respondent no. 10, supported by other respondents, considers that due to the complexity of the legislation, the daily changes in economic and fiscal legislation, excessive bureaucracy and controls that never end, the time spent on communicating with customers regarding economic analyzes on the activity of the economic entity, which could bring added value is reduced.

From the respondents' answers no. 5, 7 and 9, the focus group showed that the work for taxation represents approximately 80-85% of the professional accountant's work. There are over one hundred statements to filled in and record, which negatively influences the importance and the role of the

specialized financial-accounting services, as well as the manifestation of the client's interest in the analysis of the company's activity in the present and the future.

All respondents believe that the division of the accounting profession into several professional bodies such as: the Chamber of Financial Auditors of Romania (CAFR), the Chamber of Fiscal Consultants in Romania (CCFR), the Financial Supervisory Authority (ASF). Furthermore, the excessive regulation that led to the subordination of the accounting activity to the Ministry of Finance through the National Agency for Fiscal Administration (ANAF) and not the specialized financial-accounting services consumer with whom it is in contractual relations leads to diminishing the role and importance of specialized financial-accounting services.

Satisfaction/dissatisfaction degree regarding the collaboration with current clients theme

Most respondents think that customer relationships are rooted in the spirit of mutual respect and that satisfaction depends on the customer's interest in this contractual relationship. Thus, not all clients appreciate the quality of specialized financial-accounting services, showing indifference to the work of the specialized financial-accounting service provider, some in terms of the lack of economic education in general, others by the perception of the existing relation between the paid price and the quality of the services provided.

The interviewed subjects argued that the professional accountant, not in all circumstances, is perceived as part of the firm, the activity of which is not as appreciated, as it is required. Furthermore, they argued that this activity seeks to establish long-lasting relationships with clients based on sincerity, honesty, equity and mutual respect, knowledge of company problems, permanent involvement and offering the possibility of building a united team.

Closing, maintaining and developing long-term contractual relationships is strengthened by factors such as: harmony, understanding, honesty, fairness, integrity, independence, confidentiality, permanent communication, high satisfaction, morals and consumer confidence in specialized financial-accounting services.

Conclusions

Identifying qualitative issues and appropriate conclusions has proven to be the most difficult but also the most motivating step in qualitative analysis. Thus, we have found that managers have paid special attention to shaping a better framework, an ideal framework, in which specialized financial-accounting services can be provided by taking into account the current competitive environment in Romania and particularly in Bacau.

The obtained results highlight the responsibility of the specialized financial-accounting service providers willing to contribute to the creation of a better framework and climate in providing specialized financial-accounting services. We also noted that special attention was paid by the managers of specialized financial-accounting services in identifying and analyzing the restrictive factors that currently prevent the correct promotion of the suppliers-beneficiaries relations regarding the specialized financial-accounting services. A first factor is represented by taxation and bureaucracy in Romania that impedes interferes with the financial and accounting activity of the financial-accounting service providers and reduces the time allocated to communication with clients in order to carry out economic analyzes on the activity of the economic agent that could bring added value. Also, the division of the accounting profession into several professional bodies, the excessive regulation which led to the subordination of the accounting activity to the Ministry of Finance and not to the specialized financial-accounting service consumer with whom they are in contractual relations leads to diminishing the role and importance of the specialized financial- accounting.

Long-term relations with the beneficiaries of financial-accounting services are based on a multitude of factors such as: sincerity, honesty, equity, mutual respect, knowledge of firm problems, permanent involvement and giving the opportunity to build a united team, understanding, honesty, fairness,

integrity, independence, confidentiality, permanent communication, high degree of satisfaction, irrefragable morals and consumer confidence in specialized financial and accounting services.

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