

## ***PARTICULARITIES TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE STANDARDISATION OF SOCIAL WORK SERVICES***

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*Abstract: Services generally, and social work ones, particularly, need to be approached, defined and treated in terms of their features as compared to the ones of material goods. This article aims to highlight these features and the most important implications they have on the standardization process of social work services, all aspects taken into analysis being discussed in terms of marketing. Faced with the problem of the standardisation of social work services, the references to the ways of assessing their quality are fully explainable.*

*This analysis represents a start point for a series of applications in social work field, concerning the standardization of practical activities in social work. These applications are realized through a project founded by European Union, precisely The Operational Sector Programme for the Human Resources Development widely financed from The European Social Fund, which gives the opportunity of funding activities from the occupational area. Without being a paradox, yet not circumscribing into the natural area, a partnership between 3 Romanian universities ("George Bacovia" University of Bacau, University of North from Baia Mare and Braila Centre of Studies from "Constantin Brancoveanu" University) lead to the initiation of a project now in an development stage. In period 01.04.2009 – 31.03.2011, the partners are implementing the project called "European Qualifications and Standardization within the Social Work Field – Acronym Eur- As". (PERSEUS: POSDRU/18/1.2/G/11966)*

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### **Introduction**

In everyday language, *service* means, first of all, *the action to serve, to serve somebody's interest*,<sup>1</sup> then the result of this action, i.e. an intangible good able to satisfy a human need.

Economy specialists consider service as a system of utilities where the beneficiary buys or uses, not a material product, but a certain utility, which gives him/her certain advantages or satisfactions, unconcretised, in most cases, in a material good and destined to meet personal or social needs.<sup>2</sup> For a more rigorous definition, these specialists start from the separation of activities into three main areas:

- 1) primary, which includes agriculture, forestry and fishery;
- 2) secondary, which includes industries and construction;
- 3) tertiary, which includes services and trade.

In turn, the tertiary sector can be approached at three levels:

- *proper tertiary (tertiary I)* – restaurants, hotels, cleaning services, laundry, repairs, maintenance, crafts, hairdressing and beauty services, etc.;
- *quaternary (tertiary II)* – transport, trade, communications, financial and administrative services;
- *quintary (tertiary III)* – welfare, health, culture, education, recreation, etc.

*The American Marketing Association* defines services as *the activities, benefits or rewards offered for sale or provided in close connection with the sale of goods*.<sup>3</sup> This definition brings into

<sup>1</sup> *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, Ediția a II-a, Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 979

<sup>2</sup> T. Andre: *Strategies des concurrence dans le commerce*, Les Editions d'Organisation, Paris, 1983; J. Nusbamer: *Les services: Nouvelle donnee de leconomie*, Edition Economica, Paris, 1984

<sup>3</sup> *Marketing Definitions - A Glossary of Marketing Terms*, Committee on Definitions of the American Marketing Association, 1960

question the essential notion of services: the notion of activities. In addition, it includes among services the so-called “commercial services” (performed in association with the sale of a commodity).

Starting from this definition, W.J. Stanton reaches another one: *Services are those separate, identifiable, essentially intangible activities, which bring desired rewards and that are not necessarily related to the sale of a good or of another service.*<sup>4</sup>

For K.J. Blois, the service is “*any activity that provides benefits without necessarily involving an exchange of tangible goods*”<sup>5</sup>, this definition bringing into question one of the essential characteristics of services: intangibility.

In turn, Ph. Kotler makes a similar definition: „Service is any activity (or benefit) that a person can give another person and which is essentially intangible and does not result in an ownership of something”.<sup>6</sup>

Placing themselves on a consumer position, Bessom Richard M. and David W. Jackson believed that „*services are activities that are completed by obtaining a benefit or a utility; activities that the consumer is unable or unwilling to provide himself*”<sup>7</sup>.

On account of the main features of services, you can reach a better definition from the marketing perspective.

### Goods and services

Between the production of goods and that of services (including social work) there are **intrinsic differences**, *given by their inherent nature, by the characteristics of production and distribution processes, by consumption, etc.*

Normally, production means manufacturing, assembly, followed by the physical transport of the outcome. In industry, a number of auditors, inspectors and even robots can ensure that these productions are carried out, planning is performed, the rigid quality standards are attained. Yet, in the case of social work services planning is rarely complete, the quality control is neither precise nor easy to achieve, *complete standardization is impossible*. Although there is principle or descriptive standards, they are fully expressible in physical units – for reasons of human factor and lower weight of the material and technical factors. Not all employees of social work companies can achieve benefits at the same level, as *differences are inherent* – including the quality of services and in terms of level of service to customers in different or even identical situations. Customers are directly and differently involved in the process.

The study of the consumers’ needs and desires is the initial and the end point of any marketing approach.

#### ***The need is alpha and omega of marketing concerns.***

Although economists continually invoke it, the task of defining need was assumed (even with some priority) by linguists, sociologists and psychologists, as well.

If we started from what linguists tell us (and we definitely need to do it), we would find that, in everyday language, *by need (need, necessity or requirement - as it is called) we understand the status of lack one experiences and which involves a pressing resolution, it everything it requires to be done.*<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with this approach, Ph. Kotler formulates a much shorter and clear definition. In his opinion, „*the need is a state of awareness of a sensation of absence*”.<sup>9</sup>

Passing over the fact that some needs manifest at the *subconscious* level, we believe that such a definition is fully acceptable in marketing.

The status of absence, deprivation, anxiety, imbalance, tension, and hence of discomfort that is defined in a need, is the one which mobilizes the human intellect and energies towards finding ways of fighting it. A. Maslow, who dealt particularly with the study of needs, says that „*the unmet needs which actually explain the behaviour of individuals*”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. J. Stanton: *Fundamentals of Marketing*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1981, p. 17

<sup>5</sup> K.J Blois: *The Market of Service: An Approach*, European Journal of Marketing, nr. 8/1974, p.137

<sup>6</sup> Ph. Kotler – *Principles of Marketing*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1982, p. 681

<sup>7</sup>R. M. Bessom, W. J. David: *Service Retailing – A Strategic Marketing Approach*, Journal of Retailing, 8/1975, p. 137

<sup>8</sup> *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 693

<sup>9</sup> Ph. Kotler, G. Armstrong: *Principiile marketingului*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Teora, București, 2004, p.6

<sup>10</sup> A. Maslow: *Motivation and Personality*, Harper and Row, New York., 1952, p. 67

In connection with such statements (which are extremely common, in fact), we should make the following remark: *talking about unmet needs is the same as talking about unsatisfied dissatisfactions*, because *the need itself is a state of dissatisfaction*. Moreover, once a need is satisfied (fully), it becomes a void necessity. In other words, the satisfied need is equivalent to the lack of need.

On the other hand, if by need we understand, according to its definition, a state of absence, anxiety, stress, etc., that is, a state of dissatisfaction, we do not think the expression of needs' satisfaction, which appears to be equivalent to that of the dissatisfaction's satisfaction, is just flawless (though sometimes we use it, as well).

A second note (which is, obviously, not ours) is that a need, in order to generate extinction concerns, must first be transformed into desire.

In everyday language, by desire we understand the feelings of the one who desires or aspires to something.<sup>11</sup> Starting from here, marketers have defined the need as:

- *a transformed form of the need*
- *a need passed through the filter of reason;*
- *a need modelled by the individual's culture and personality;*<sup>12</sup>
- *the human aspiration towards concrete means of need satisfaction*<sup>13</sup> etc.

As far as we are concerned, we are for the last interpretation of this concept.

*Needs do not generate abstract concerns for their elimination, but orientation towards as specific goods as possible.*

While needs are limited in number (they can always be listed), desires are almost limitless (given the great diversity of their coverage means). One and the same need (such as food, let's say) can generate a great number of desires, directing the individual towards a great variety of goods (meat of all kinds, all sorts of bread, fruit of all varieties, etc.). We consider here the existing assets, but also the absent ones.

On the other hand, it needs not be overlooked the fact that needs do not automatically turn into desires. For example, the needs we are not aware of (those that occur in the human unconsciousness), and the forgotten ones (which are real, but do not create obvious pressures being passed, the stringency with which others manifests, on secondary plans) do not necessarily generate desires. Also, in the transformation of needs (which is manifested in the form of impulses, especially) into desires there can be some barriers. Thus, the aspiration or orientation of people towards certain goods can be suppressed by:

- the legal provisions that forbid the commercialization and consumption of certain products (such as drugs, but not only);
- education (by which the aspiration to cigarettes, alcoholic drinks are extinct before they manifest);
- religion (which forbids Muslims, for example, the wish to eat pork);
- the lack of money (which would make absurd or completely irrational – therefore null – the aspiration of people towards goods which are impossible to buy);
- the lack of information about the existence of certain goods etc.

If marketing cannot create (but is only aware of ) certain needs, it can create or stimulate a multitude of desires.

As far as the appearance of desire is concerned, the idea that some desires would not be generated by needs, but by the mere perception of *the existence of goods*, is widespread among specialists.<sup>14</sup> Whenever we happen to see some goods (especially those we had no knowledge of) we immediately feel the desire to have or consume them. But we must not conclude that only the mere existence of such goods would generate the need to consume. In reality, the need for which they were created, already existed, but in a *latent* state; their perception transforming it into an active form. In other words, the perception of goods may only activate a latent need (or a need we were not aware of), the latter (also a need) generating actually the desire to purchase (and not just the mere perception of goods).

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<sup>11</sup> *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 316

<sup>12</sup> Ph. Kotler, G. Armstrong: *Principiile marketingului*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Teora, București, 2004, p.7

<sup>13</sup> E. Maxim, T. Gherasim: *Marketing*, Editura Economică, București, 2002, p. 31

<sup>14</sup> L. Lendrevie: *Mercator*, 6<sup>E</sup> Édition, Dalloz, Paris, 2000, p.134

Finally, in order to complete the image related to the binomial needs - desires, and to prevent further confusion, it should be noted that, in marketing studies, needs (in this context called **generic needs**<sup>15</sup>) should be given priority. In other words, if someone asks for *a car*, we must be clear that that someone needs space movements the vehicle can ensure (this is “the generic need”), and not the car itself.

If we were to bring into discussion the phrase “generic need”, we would immediately find that it is given the meaning of meaning of desire-generating need (the attribute “generic” having here a totally different meaning than that given by the Romanian language dictionary). Considering the fact that practically all needs generate desires, we find absolutely unnecessary - and confusing) the attribute “generic” attached to the concept of need. With the reported exception of the real meaning, it would be somewhat justified only for the needs generating other needs (to differentiate them from derived ones).

Needs (and desires, as well) have some features that must necessarily be taken into account in marketing studies.

First of all, they have a **dynamic** character, multiplying and diversifying in time. There is no need to bring arguments to the fact that needs (and desires) of an adult are others than those he had in the first years of his life, or that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are other needs than those existing five centuries ago.

Secondly, needs and desires have an **elastic** character, the intensity (pressure) with which they manifest decreases with the consumption of goods for their coverage. Between the level of consumption (of a certain kind) and that the intensity of the need that imposed it, there is an inverse relationship.

Thirdly, needs and desire have a **renewable** character. It is hard to imagine needs that could be met once and for all. Typically, one extinguished need, after a certain time, becomes active. Therefore, the consumption of goods has to be renewed, as well. It is known that the consumption needs of people are manifested through the desire to take possession of the means by which they can be satisfied.

The way of meeting a need (or desire) bears, above all, the name of “good”. In general, by *good we understand any result of a natural or artificial process able to cover a need.*

Goods take the most diverse forms. Thus, they are *material* or *immaterial* (they are called services), may come directly from nature (water, air, light and heat of the sun) or from human actions (bread, cars). If for exchange, they are called commodities.

### **Marketing as means to needs**

In marketing, the means for covering needs are also called products, by them not only understanding the outputs of the processes conceived, directed and performed by humans (called *of production*), but the results of natural processes that can be consumed directly.

The category of means used to meet needs includes: *people* that, one way or another, directly meet certain needs (singers, football players), *places* (such as places of relaxation), *ideas* etc., i.e. everything that is used to meet needs.

As concerning the relationship between desires, needs and goods, we would like to emphasise the following: the need is the unique source (cause) of desire (as is generally considered), just as the good role is not only the means of satisfying the desire (and obviously of meeting the need). Defining itself as the orientation towards a means of meeting the need, it is very evident that the desire has a twofold determination: on the one hand, it is determined by need, and, on the other hand, by the good that can be used to meet it. The consumer is always driven by a need; he wants something that can be used to extinguish it. If he is hungry, for example, he does not just want food, but various means to satisfy hunger (lamb, cow milk, French fries). When, in order to meet a need, a certain good (French fries, for instance) does not exist yet, there is neither desire (appetite) to eat it. It is absurd (and tormenting) for the rational consumer to want something that does not exist.

If by need I understand a state of default which causes (to the one who lives it) a tension and dissatisfaction, by means of covering a need we will understand any means that can transform dissatisfaction (caused by a need) in satisfaction.

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<sup>15</sup> Șt. Pruteanu, C. Munteanu, C. Caluschi: *Inteligența Marketing Plus*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1998, p. 72

Appealing to microeconomics, I can see that the knowledge or ability of a good to create, as a result of consumption or use, the satisfaction is called utility or subjective value.<sup>16</sup>

A good is desired only if it has utility for those who want it (ability to provide satisfaction). In fact, from the consumer's point of view, the very notion of **good** is associated with utility. If "something" is not in any condition to provide consumer's satisfaction, it will be immediately considered no longer a good, but a useless thing (in a very general sense) or (i.e. harmful - if, instead of satisfaction it provides dissatisfaction). In other words, desire and utility are inseparable concepts.

According to Ph. Kotler's opinion satisfaction is defined as expressing "the measure in which a product's perceived performance is up to the consumer's expectations"<sup>17</sup>, this measure being given by "the pleasure or disappointment someone feels when comparing his impression on the performance (results) of a product with the expectations he had before buying it"<sup>18</sup>.

There are several reasons why we don't share this way of conceiving the consumer's satisfaction.

### Satisfaction as Utility

In order to clarify the meaning of the term satisfaction, I have to appeal, first of all, to that given by linguists. They have reached the conclusion that to satisfy (a verb derived from the Latin *satisfacere*) means: to content somebody by carrying out a wish, a necessity, requirement"<sup>19</sup>, in their opinion by *satisfaction* understanding "a feeling of contentment, of pleasure. What produces contentment"<sup>20</sup>. The utility of the consumed product is exactly what produces pleasure to the consumer. In other words, the mere fact that a product is useful for its consumer (covering a need) is sufficient, in my view, to create him a certain satisfaction (either higher or lower). This is the first reason why I do not fully agree with the view expressed by Ph. Kotler.

A second reason derives from a reasoning which is related more to the common sense than to the theory of consumption (and of utility): the consumer lives a feeling of satisfaction (contentment or pleasure) even when there is no comparison between actual performance of the product and its expectations (either because he does not know its performance too well, either because he failed to realize his expectations). This is especially true for entirely new products (but not only).

Being unable to equate desire with expectations (because there are enough situations where the consumer, although he wants the product to be very efficient, expects - as a result of prior assessment - it to be less efficient or even inefficient), I believe that it is not the degree of consistency between performance and expectations, but especially the one between performance and desire what determines the level of consumer satisfaction.

On the other hand, I cannot deny the fact that the level of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of the consumer is influenced by the way in which the performances of the product confirms (or not) his/her expectations.

As I am concerned, as I have already mentioned, I am in favor of defining satisfaction in tight connection with the utility of the goods and with the consume action (in which this manifest or not). We must not be specialists in marketing to notice an essential thing: even without effectively consuming goods, but only through the simple fact of possessing them, people are sometimes satisfied, the more they live a feeling of satisfaction through the act of consuming. In other words, in the extent in which a product has utility, it will furnish satisfaction to people by only possessing, using or consuming it.

An individual presents importance for the specialist in marketing not only as a bearer of some needs or desires, but as a bearer of a demand - in one of its manifestation forms. The deeper knowledge of the consumers' needs and desires do not represent a preoccupation in itself of the marketers or entrepreneurs when protecting their interests. It is only the point of departure in estimating the demand.

In everyday language, by demand one understands a solicitation or a demand, respectively a "quantity of goods and services necessary in order to cover the consume"<sup>21</sup>.

The political economy defines the demand as being:

<sup>16</sup>D. Gherasim: *Convergențe în teoriile privind esența prețurilor*, Editura Economică, București, 2005, p.45-52

<sup>17</sup>Ph. Kotler, G. Armstrong: *Principiile marketingului*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Teora, București, 2003, p. 10

<sup>18</sup>Ph. Kotler, G. Armstrong: *Managementul marketingului*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Teora, București, 2005, p.51

<sup>19</sup> *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 947

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 948

<sup>21</sup> *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române*, , Ediția a II-a, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p.164

- 1) *the quantity of goods solicited on the market at a certain price;*
- 2) *solicitation (determined by a need – manifested through a desire) to be in the possession of a good, at which it is added the possibility and the disposal to pay the price pretended by a seller to obtain it.*<sup>22</sup>

The first definition given by the economists for the demand has the quality to be very concise, and the second one, the quality to make the demand in correspondence with its main factors which contribute to its appearance or manifestation (the needs transformed into desires, the capacity to pay and prices). More precisely, from the second one it results that:

- 1) long as the desire does not transform itself into the desire to produce the respective goods it does not generate demand;
- 2) when the payment possibility lack (incomes or other goods to be offered in exchange), the simple manifestation of the purchasing desire is not sufficient for the appearance of the demand;
- 3) even when the need and the desire to purchase have been covered by means of payment (existing thus need, desire, specific incomes), the demand does not manifest if the solicited price is not acceptable (being considered highly exaggerated).

The specialists in marketing, although operating with the above mentioned matters linked to the notion of demand, approach it in a more complex way, defining it as being the ***solicited quantity from a certain product, at a certain price, in certain place, in a given period of time and in certain environment conditions, by one or all the clients disposing of the sufficient willingness to buy, as a result of the manifestation of certain need and desire, within the framework created by a given marketing mix program.***

All the actions linked to the marketing preference, follow, on one hand, the knowledge of the demand, and on the other part, want to influence it to the benefit of the firm promoting it and in disfavor of the competition. Thus we may say that, if the need is equally linked to the starting point and the ending one of the marketing studies, ***the demand represents the central point around which all the marketing actions of the firm gravitate.*** Absolutely all the marketing mix components aim, in the end, the demand. According to the marketing vision, the product must be designed in such a way it create, attract and satisfy demand. Promotion is only made in order to realize, stimulate or maintain demand. Price is established in such a way not to inhibit but motivate the demand. Distribution should be done in such a way as to insure the best satisfaction of the demand. Consumers' needs and desires are studied in order to estimate demand. The firm studies competition in order to insure the demand addressed to it. The consumer's behavior is also studied in order to know the mechanism of the demand manifestation etc.

### **The Doctrine of Demand**

From the point of view of the tasks which must be assumed by the marketing in connection with each form a part, the estates of the demand have been illustrated and they can be grouped in special ones and real ones.

a) ***Special estates.*** In this category belong: the negative demand, the null one and the latent one.

1) "The negative demand" is the special estate existing on the market in which the product is not agreed (or even definitely refused) by those manifesting it. Such an estate would be that manifested by nonsmokers opposite the cigarettes, of the Muslims opposite pork, of the employers opposite the employees having records etc. In its case, the marketers have the task to find the causes leading to such kind of manifestations, and if it possible, to eliminate (through re-education of the consumers, through demonstrations which can eliminate doubts, by re-designing the product etc.). The marketing actions used in order to change negative "demand" into a positive one are circumscribed to the so-called *conversional marketing*.

As we cannot speak about demand when there is a lack of the desire to possess a certain product, we think it is necessary to state some other arguments in order to eliminate such an estate of the demand. ***If the real desire to purchase the product does not exist (or even on the contrary), we cannot speak here about demand.*** The demand is not negative but the attitude of the consumers towards a certain product. In other words, instead of speaking about a "negative demand", we would speak about a ***negative attitude*** of the consumers towards some products offered for the purchase.

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<sup>22</sup> T. Gherasim: *Microeconomie*, Volumul I, Editura Economica, București, 1993

2) *The null demand* is the same with *the lack of demand* towards a product existing on the market. It is met when the product is unknown, excessively expensive or useless (although known) for the addressing consumers etc. The task of marketing in this case is that of stimulating demand by eliminating the causes which have led to its lack (by publicity, discounts, revised product etc.). In this case it is about a *stimulating marketing*.

Making again an appeal to the demand definition, which supposes the manifestation of the interest and of the desire to purchase, it results that not null demand cannot be accepted as being a form of the proper demand, it being in fact an attitude of total indifference from the part of the consumers towards certain products created for them (the perfectly healthy people towards medicines, of the Romanian uneducated peasant towards the academic treaties of astronomy, of the blind towards a painting gallery, of the bagger towards the luxury yachts etc.).

3) *The latent demand* is the one ready in any moment to trigger itself, being backed up by a real purchase need or desire, even an acute one, as well as all the other conditions of manifestation resulting from the above mentioned definitions, but which has no correspondence in a good capable to cover it. We speak here about genre products such as: medicines for incurable diseases, vehicles with non-polluting engines based upon the hydrogen taken directly from water, the youth elixir etc. The *development marketing* at which one appeals in this case should assume the task of conceiving and constructing products capable to cover it.

b) ***Estates of the real demand.*** The real demand is the demand which gathers all the defining conditions for the effective manifestation, being found on the market under the following forms:

1) *growing demand*, in full ascent and which imposes itself to be sustained through measures linked to the *development marketing* ;

2) *full demand (complete)* which is situated in the best accordance with marketing objectives of the firm, and which must be maintained a long period of time through *maintenance marketing actions*;

3) *declining demand*, which level is more and more low, and which may cause two problems to the firm: gradual giving up to the manufacturing of the respective good or re-launching it on the market (based upon *remarketing actions*);

4) *fluctuating demand*, which level is variable from one period to another according to certain factors, in this case *sincromarketing actions* being necessary;

5) *excessive demand*, the level of which overpasses the level of production capacity of the firm, a reason for which there exists the danger to let a part of the clients with a non-covered need (with all the resulting negative consequences), which must be tempered and discouraged through *demarketing actions* ( through price growth);

6) *non-desirable demand*, which is oriented towards harmful products (cigarettes, drugs) desired by the persons manifesting it, but which are totally rejected by the society, in general. Even if their name expresses a paradox of the type “to desire the undesirable” (as to demand means before all to desire), by specifying it is desired by the *society* (not by his/her bearer), the word undesirable could, though, be accepted. This makes the object of *anti – marketing*, which proposes its destruction (by prohibited prices, by consumers’ re-education campaigns etc.).

### **From material goods to non-material services**

#### **1. Characteristics of quantitative aspects**

In the opinion of the Americans Ph. Kotler and G. Armstrong, services have four general characteristics:

- intangibility;
- simultaneity of production and consumption;
- impossibility to be stored (perishable);
- variability (heterogeneity).

a) ***Intangibility*** is the main feature by which social work services are different from material goods, being translated by the fact that lacking a physical form, before being purchased and consumed, services can not be seen, tasted, heard, touched or smelled. Therefore, they create multiple problems to the services workers, forcing potential customers to be aware of their tangible (or visible) parts – i.e. the service records. Although they can not see the service, they may however see different tangible aspects associated to it.

Emphasizing the visible parts is a central aspect of the marketing of social work services. As the package of a bar of soap or of a perfume indicates something about the material product,

visible aspects of a social work service are the first clues about it. Marketing has to highlight them in the most advantageous way, as a first image of it. While material goods sellers must use abstract ideas when they want to promote or sell products, social work service providers must produce hard evidence and use images so that their abstract offer becomes practical and marketable.

There are several ways to underscore the specific elements of a social service, such as the environments in which services are provided, staff appearance and behaviour, communication and prices.

*The physical environment* (provided by the outside and inside the service unit, the existence of harmonious design and structure, the location of compartments and routes of people's movement, the existence of "queues" etc.) greatly affects the way social work services offered by providers are perceived.

*The staff* involved in the service production and sale, both by number and (especially) by qualification, behaviour and attitude leaves its mark on the rapidity of serving and on the other parameters of service quality.

*The means of information* for the public, concretised in leaflets, posters, monitors, printers, telephones, symbols of identification etc also represent concrete material elements by means of which the compensation of the intangibility of social work services is achieved.

b) *Most services are both produced and consumed in the same place and at the same time.* The social work service is carried out in real time and it is consumed exactly when it is produced.

Therefore, a first characteristic of social work services (from this point of view) refers to the **placement of the service unit**, involving also a particular structure of costs. *The place where the service is carried out is, usually, the same with the service production place.* The service is carried out where the customer is. The participation of the customer is extremely important: no customer, no service. Services exist due to their permanent contact with the customer.

Secondly, due to the simultaneity of production and consumption, ***the quality of social work services cannot be assessed before they are carried out, therefore before they are bought, but only during the activity.*** Moreover, there are social work services which cannot be assessed even after consumption. The difficulty of assessing the quality of services involves *the perception of a greater risk at purchasing than in the case of material objects*, and the opinions of those who experimented the service is of great importance. Thus, the important role of verbal communication in promoting social work services – and, at the same time, the special attention that the marketing specialists have to pay to opinion leaders.

The simultaneity of production and consumption involves not only the presence of the service provider during the activity, but also *the participation of the consumer to the service provision.* By means of the information the customer sends to his/her lawyer, he/she contributes to a good provision of the service.

Besides the positive aspects (knowledge of the service, involvement in its development), a role that satisfies the consumer in the carrying out of the service, it has also a negative aspect: any change in its carrying out makes its modernisation difficult, involving changes in buying or consumption habits.

Simultaneity of production, sale and consumption of social services is required. If in the case of material goods consumption can be carried out only after the completion of production (the two processes are strictly separated in time), in the case of social work services consumption can take place only during their production. For example, it is impossible to produce first a service of taking care of an older person, and then (eventually) to store it and use another time. When the social work process begins, its consumption by the customer begins, too, and when its production ceases, consumption ends. This feature requires therefore the presence of the client (along with the manufacturer) to the provision of the service.

Being inseparable from individual providers, social work services involve certain ***relations, often very personalised*** between providers and beneficiary. Therefore, the individual providers may be themselves, a special attraction for customers. A famous social worker or a famous doctor, for instance, is always elements of attraction for customers of social services they render.

Regarding ***distribution***, in the case of material goods it requires three elements: the factory or workshop, showroom and place of consumption - which have, usually, different sites. Instead, for most social work services, we are dealing with *a unique location* where the entire activity of service - distribution – consumption takes place. This does not mean that intermediaries should be excluded

entirely from the supply chain. All of them provide ante factum sale and purchase of social work services (only before they are performed - and not after they were “produced”, as in the case of material goods).

Unlike the market of material goods, the market of social work services operates according to a separate competitive logic, being rather local than global. Market and competition are not global but local. A home for children in a particular locality, for example, can address only the demand that is manifested in that locality, and it cannot compete with homes in other localities.

c) ***The impossibility to be stored.*** With no material nature and being impossible to separate, in time, the production from their consumption, social work services cannot be stored for future sale. In addition, the time required for their experience or their provision may be distributed on time axis according to the preferences of the one who organizes and coordinates production. Instead, there can be “stored” (held in reserve) production capacity on account of which these services are provided, to cope with seasonal variations (or otherwise) of the application. The service institution is required to maintain its operational status independent of customers’ fluctuations.

The social work services must be carried out when (and how) the customer needs. A need which is met by services, not by products that can be removed from a stock, is manifested only at a certain moment - like an anniversary or a birthday. Therefore, it is said that social work services are highly perishable, this being one of their characteristics.

d) ***Variability.*** As material goods with the same destination may be very different, variability or ***heterogeneity***, from a qualitative, is not a specific property of services only. It becomes a feature of social work services only if seen as expressing the impossibility of their identical recurrence, from one provision to another (depending on their provider, the place and time they are provided, etc.). The provider may have an adverse disposition, may be tired or upset. Moreover, the provision differs according to the work style, the personality of the provider. Although people often try to standardize the process of service provision within the institution, the standardization of services is truly very difficult.

The consumers of social work services also perceive this variability and attempt to obtain as much information about the provider.

e) Being consumed while it is produced, customers can be only ensured the right to benefit from a social work service. Therefore, to the four characteristics of services already provided, another one can be added: ***the impossibility of establishing their ownership*** (as in the case of material goods). Hence, ***the impossibility of their protection by patents*** - that is why their copying is a very easy operation. Therefore, the operation of their differentiation from one provider to another ***by means of marks*** is more difficult than for material goods (but not impossible to accomplish).

The characteristics of social work services influence, to a greater or lesser extent, all the marketing mix components, requiring the customization of marketing in this field<sup>23</sup>.

## 2. Characteristics of qualitative aspects

The service quality is the result of comparing the customer expectations with the experience he has during provision. Quality is thus defined by consumers. They are those who appreciate the ultimate quality of the service as good, mediocre or poor. The remaining assessments are irrelevant or insufficient, anyway.

### 2.1. Defining the service quality

Starting from the content of the concept of quality, by quality of a social work service we understand *the degree of correlation between the characteristics (technical, economic and social) of the services and features of social need to be covered through their means,*<sup>24</sup> *respectively the customers’ expectations.*

In the case of social services, there can be ***two types of quality***:

- ***technical quality***, which expresses the result of provision;
- ***functional quality***, which represents the way the service is provided.

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<sup>23</sup> I. Cetină, R. Brandabur: *Marketingul serviciilor – abordare teoretică și studii de caz*, Editura Uranus, București, 2004, p. 23

<sup>24</sup> T. Gherasim: *Calitatea transporturilor*, Editura Universității „Alexandru I. Cuza”, Iași, 1997, p. 11

As, during the consumer-provider interaction, the provider has the possibility to demonstrate the quality of its service, we can appreciate that, from the point of view of consumers, the functional quality is equal or even more important than the technique one.

The main *reference points* of *customers' expectations* regarding the characteristics of social work services that they want are:<sup>25</sup>

a) *verbal communications* with other clients, by means of which through a certain image quality is transmitted to prospective clients by those who have already consumed those services;

b) *personal requirements*, which depend on the level of education, social status, income, etc. available to consumers;

c) *past personal experiences*, according to which a certain quality of current social service can be considered satisfactory or unsatisfactory according to the level for a similar service already consumed;

d) *promotional messages*, which can raise or lower customers' expectations.

## 2.2. Quality evaluation

One of the main objectives of the manager of a social work service institution is to *quantify the quality* of provision and knowledge of consumer response to the received services. The service quality improvement programs which have not clearly defined and quantified their goals are likely to degenerate into an exercise of "cosmetics", in which the objectives are defined in general terms such as "improvement", "maximize" etc. In this case, the basic principle of a manager should be: *if you cannot measure, you cannot assess and if you cannot assess, you can not lead.*

As many strategies to increase consumer satisfaction are difficult to develop and implement, the providing institutions have to decide the optimum ratio between the effort made to improve the quality of social service and effects achieved.

### The quality of social work services

The assessment of the quality of social work services is realised taking into account:<sup>26</sup>

a) their tangible (visible) elements, such as: the physical and psychological environment in which they are performed, the equipment used, etc. the staff attire.;

b) accuracy in meeting the promises and obligations of the provider;

c) responsiveness to customer requests;

d) kindness of personnel trained in performing services;

e) the degree of personalization and understanding the specific needs of the consumer - ie the extent to which the peculiarities of each client (which includes the personalisation of both needs and relations).

Of these five elements, credibility is most important. An institution does not achieve anything if it does not rely on consumer confidence - which is its most precious resource.

Consumers appreciate credibility after the completion of provision. They do not give additional credit for the performance of activities that providers are obliged to provide. Social work institutions receiving appropriation in white are those who impresses by care, attention, concern and involvement during provision. *The exceeding of consumer expectations* is the element of surprise and the best chance to catch it is during provision, when the staff meets the client.

A firm providing social work services should pay attention both to the result of provision and to the provision process.

Providers become excellent only if they overcome the threshold of power and performance, aiming to create emotional connections with customers. They aim more than consumer satisfaction, building loyalty relationships, using any means to impress them during the provision process.

Most social work institutions do not realize its potential offered by consumer-provider interaction, acting defensively - seeking quick gains. The staff providing the service is unable to take initiative, to provide a creative activity, to take risks.

Competent companies know very well that the surprise of the consumer occurs when at the moment of provider-consumer meeting, which includes inspiration, perception and spontaneity of the staff - qualities that should be encouraged and cultivated by managers. Consumers are accustomed to the routine of the service, with its very good provision, being surprised only when providers offer

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<sup>25</sup> I. Cetină, R. Brandabur: *Marketingul serviciilor – abordare teoretică și studii de caz*, Editura Uranus, București, 2004, p. 58

<sup>26</sup> L. L. Berry, A. Parasuraman: *Marketing Services*, The Free Press, New York, 1991, p. 16

something else, when they meet their desires, when they are involved in solving arising problems, even if it is not their responsibility. Customers notice the extra effort and appreciate it.

Due to their characteristics, services can not be tested before being purchased and *are sometimes difficult to assess even after they have been provided*. For this reason, the providing companies have to make additional effort in order to prove correctness.

To assess the quality of services, there can be used **quality marketing models**. The best known of these are: the SOW model of consumer (developed by Saser, Olsen and Wyckoff), the consumption and evaluation pattern developed by Fisk and ZPB model.

a) The SOW seeks to establish the manner of assessment of a service by a segment of customers with similar needs. For this, the set of customer needs is transformed into a set of desired attributes of the services required, attributes that relate to:

- Security (degree of trust in the respective service);
- consistency (degree of trust in customers' reactions);
- attitude (interpersonal reactions);
- range of services offered;
- the environment of serving;
- availability (access in time and space to the respective service);
- time required for serving etc..

Is it possible to conceive many variants of combination of these attributes (both by the respective company and by competitors).

The manner of assessment and choice of the customer is reflected in sub models:

- with a single attribute with influence over the choice;
- with a dominant attribute and minimum thresholds and of satisfaction of the other attributes;
- with the alternatives judged by all the other attributes.

The selection of social work services takes into account its price, being based on the quality/price ratio.

b) The Fisk model is based on three phases of service provision:

- pre consumption;
- actual consumption;
- post consumption.

1. During the *pre consumption phase* occurs: the recognition of the problem, information, the identification of alternatives and its selection. At its conclusion there is a *first assessment* of the social work service by the customer (in order to identify the best solution).

2. During the *consumption phase* there takes place the second *assessment* of the social work service by the customer. Benefiting from its usefulness, its expectations (born in the previous phase) are compared with the satisfaction felt after the consumption itself.

3. In the *post consumption stage a final assessment* takes place (according to the previous two and satisfaction after the service consumption).

According to the way a company manages the quality of serving, it can be either successful or failure. Thus, if it adopts a proactive position, focusing its activity on the analysis of customer needs and desires, it will be *successful*, and if adopts a passive position, waiting for the emergence of dissatisfaction to solve it, it will be a *failure*. Both developments largely depend on the degree of responsiveness to any complaints (and on the way to solve them).

It is evident that the prevention of possible complaints is much less expensive than solving them. It is considered that the actions necessary to gain a new customer are *five times more expensive* than keeping an existing customer. Moreover, a dissatisfied customer means cumulative adverse publicity, which very adversely affects the company's image. Next, it is to be noted that only a small percentage of dissatisfied customers complains, only a percentage of these complaints will be received by the company and only one percent of the registered complaints will be solved according to the customers' expectations (which will result in a chain loss of certain customers).

c) *The Z.P.B. service quality evaluation model* was developed by V.A. Zeithaml, d'A. Parasuraman and L.L. Berry.<sup>27</sup> In his case, the quality of services is defined as the difference between the customer's expectations on the respective service and the perception of the service quality after using it – we could speak about quality when the results surpass expectations.

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<sup>27</sup>G. Tocquer, M. Langlois: *Marketing des services. Le défi relationnel*, Dunod, Paris, 1992, p. 112 - 114

In general, the customer's expectations are influenced by various factors, such as: word of mouth advertising, his/her personal needs, the past experience, the company's promotional efforts, etc.

### Conclusion

The quality of the social work service is influenced by a number of their attributes, such as:

- tangibility – given by the physical support of the service, the service personnel, the communication way etc.
- reliability – the ability to perform the service correctly from the very beginning;
- rapidity – the achievement of the service within time limits acceptable to the customer;
- competence – which appears when the features and the training of the service personnel meet the required delivery of services;
- courtesy - politeness, courtesy and respect for the customer from the contact personnel;
- credibility – the honesty of the service company;
- safety – absence of dangers, risks and doubts when using the service;
- accessibility – the ease with which the service can be obtained when desired;
- communication – customer information and the company's responsiveness to it;
- knowledge of the customer – company's understanding of the customer's needs and behaviour, etc..

In order to improve the quality of social work services we must correctly understand all the above attributes and to raise their level of performance. This will be the body of another research.

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