

# Direct Response Advertising in Romanian Dental Field: A Qualitative Analysis

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**Abstract**— *Romanian dental industry is in its initial stage of development, while the market has a huge potential for future growth. Hence, the advertiser from this field should integrate direct response with image based advertising for reaching more efficiency and effectiveness. The paper aims at identifying the degree of direct response advertising vs. image advertising, as a marketing tool for dental services and products. The assessment will be distinctly processed by different types of products. Moreover, the study tries to draw some correlation between dental market development and the above mentioned rate, during the latest five years.*

The performed research is a qualitative one, based on content analysis of 748 advertisements, published in professionals' magazines, between 2006 and 2010.

The research outcomes reflect a balanced advertising for materials, equipments, services and reveal strong image advertising for the dental products end-users. The economic crisis has changed the pattern in dental advertising, mainly by emphasizing rather on emotion than on rational reason.

**Keywords**— *direct response advertising, imagery advertising, content analysis, small and medium enterprises, dental industry.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The marketing challenge facing dentistry today is how dental community continues to build image while creating demand. Direct marketing advertising spending by health care providers has raised from 200 million in 1990 to 800 million in 1998 and 1.2 billion in 2008 USD [1]. Advertising by dentist is relatively a recent phenomenon. The research in this field reveals that advertising and marketing clearly have an important place in the future of dental care services [2].

The increased "mass market" appeal of dental services alongside of growing competition in the market (at a product/manufacture and service delivery level) and an increase in brand level awareness creates a greater need for marketers to use effectively the direct response advertising.

The present study performs *the first assessment of Romanian direct response and image advertising among dental products and services*, using an adapted methodology. We are going to analyze the differences between direct responses advertising and image advertising (taking into

consideration their practical advantages) and, also, the integrative manner to use them, in order to maximize their efficiency in today's dental field.

*Findings will aid marketers in planning their strategies and tactics, to promptly react to changes in Romanian dental market.*

In the following, we shortly present the main evidence from global dental industry and its advertising, emphasizing on the Romanian market particularities, in order to create connection with direct response- image advertising degree.

## II. DENTAL INDUSTRY TODAY

The dental industry is one of the most attractive segments of the healthcare industry, with an estimated size of about 18.8 billion USD in 2008. Latest, the market growth reached 4.6% percent annually [3], [4]. The UE markets have experienced also constant growth, in recent years. Some factors that explain the constant expanded demand for dental services are the following [5]:

- Growing acceptance and reduced stigma towards cosmetic dental surgery,
- The strong competition in materials and equipments production catalyzed technical progress in the field,
- Price reduction of cosmetic treatments allows a wider variety of individuals to benefit,
- Media coverage has created a high level of consumer interest in such procedures and services.

The National Institute of Statistics [6] states that in Romanian dental market are acting 8071 private centers (clinics, medical dentist and other societies). The growing rate per year is around 11%. The Romanian dental equipment is imported mainly from Germany, Italy, Czech Republic, Hungary, United Kingdom and recorded a significant growth. All the distributors and manufacturers are small and medium enterprises.

According to recent research reports [7], [8], [9] *Romanian dental industry* is undeveloped. During the last years, the rapid expansion and growth of the dental care industry, due to globalization and increasing awareness of consumers for treatment alternatives, will contribute to the development

of both dental services and equipments market in Romania. On the other hand, the *Romanian dental market* reaches 300 million Euros [10] and has a huge potential for future growth.

Various factors such as low costs, highly trained surgeon, dentists and specialist, short treatment period, developing the dental tourism in the country and investments in the latest technologies will catalyze the Romanian dental industry in coming years.

### III. DIRECT ADVERTISING AND IMAGE ADVERTISING – LITERATURE REVIEW

Direct response advertising aims at closing a sale or a transaction in short time. Image advertising means building brand equity, which establishing a brand's value proposition in the minds of consumers.

In the past, image advertising and direct response advertising have been analyzed relatively isolated from one another [11]. Recent research finds multiple way of increasing communication efficiency by integrating features belonging to both mentioned orientation.

*Image marketing* is about building an image in the marketplace, while direct response (or direct marketing) is all about producing calls, driving customer traffic and getting immediate revenue. On image marketing side, the return of investment is not going to occur immediately.

On the other hand, *direct-response advertising* is exclusively designed to solicit a direct response which can be tracked and measured. It supposes direct communication between the viewer and the advertiser. Furthermore, direct-response campaigns perform best if the underlying strategies and tactics are highly competitive.

Direct-response advertising is characterized by four primary elements [12]:

- An offer
- Sufficient information for the consumer to make a decision whether to act
- An explicit "call to action"
- Means of response (typically multiple options such as a toll free number, web page, and email)

Referring to the *print advertising*, we will present some findings from psychological visual imagery research, relevant for our study. The outcomes focus on using image advertising benefits for long term instead of direct advertising. We mention the most important ones [13], [14]:

1. The larger visual images produce better learning or determine positive brand attitude. The picture-then-word superiority held (regardless of whether the target response was to recognize the picture or to recall the word).

2. Attention holding is important for evaluative response (the longer the stimulus is attended to beyond two seconds, the better). Learning is facilitated if the order is picture-word rather word-picture.
3. Greater use of variation on a theme for print advertising enhances more attention. Varied but related illustrations are consistent with novel-but – familiar principle.

The studies reveal that is only one situation where illustration size is not important: direct response advertising of the informative “*long to*” variety. Also, the typical technique in direct response advertising is to provide the reader with as much information as possible in order to achieve a “stimulus sufficient” decision.

From a different point of view, recent interest has been directed toward integrating the two disciplines [15], [16]. The investigation of the effective way of melding the two techniques conducted to several benefits of both traditional and direct marketers. The factors that distinguish direct response advertising from image advertising are examined from multiple points of view: percentage of advertise image, main purpose, emphasizing on product or brand, listing several contact possibilities, frequency, segmentation or the quality of advertise image [17].

A very important presumption for this study is the following: for efficient direct response advertising, it's important that a brand's equity have been communicated in advance of the consumer's purchase decision. It requires long-term perspective and understanding of the many ways in which advertising works. In this regard, it is vital to take into account all of the marketing stimuli that affect consumer purchase behavior, not just that which occurred just prior to purchase.

Narrowing the perspective, a study [18] concerning the attitude toward *dental advertisement*, conducted in USA, reveals that more than half of the consumers feel that newspaper and professional magazines are appropriate media for dentist to use in advertising. Another research find that [2] the great majority of persons interested in dental services and products watch dental advertisement in weekly magazines, health or beauty magazines or professionals magazines. We have also to take into consideration another aspect too: the adoption of cosmetic dental procedures in an extended level by mainstream consumer created a shift from “type of procedure” to advertising at brand level. Finally, an important particularity of advertising in dental field (and in healthcare, in general) is the mass-media low influence for the end-users. It is more important the opinion of leaders, prescribers and reference groups [19] in choosing such a product. Hence, *advertiser acting in dental care should emphasize on leaders first, after that on final consumers.*

## IV. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Objectives

The main goal of this research is to investigate the degree of direct response advertising in Romanian dental magazines. The main objectives derived from the mentioned goal are:

- Assessing the penetration of direct response advertising as a marketing tool for dental services and products (materials, equipments, laboratory services, educational services);
- Evaluating the degree of image vs. direct response orientation of different types of products/services in dental care advertisements;
- Revealing the evolution of this examined rate in the latest five years

### B. Research Methodology

The performed research is a *qualitative* one, based on *content analysis* of 748 advertisements published in the last 5 years (from 2006 to 2010).

The data was collected from Dental Target magazine. It is a Romanian publication which has national coverage and appears four times per year. We chose this print magazine due to its audience (600000/magazine) and its targets: the medical dentist, the dental technician, the nurse and also the patients. Manufacturers, importers and distributors of dental materials and equipments, dental cabinets and laboratories post information in this magazine.

*Content analysis* of print advertising is mainly used for examine and measuring the visual and verbal elements of advertisements or to analyze the feelings, beliefs or attitudes of a culture in their environment.

In order to reach our objective, we adapted an existing method propose by Peltier *et al* [11] and those modified by Seiz [17], fitted for cosmetic products. In this study, the mentioned method was adjusted by adding suited criteria to the dental field. From the beginning, we added more constraints in operational direct response advertising in magazines to the mentioned studies determination, like *dimension advertising specific web address* to purchase the product. In the original methodology there are present: advertisements with the specific address, local phone number, a toll free number, a fax number of where to purchase the brand, a mail in coupon.

To assess the degree of direct response versus image based in each advertisement, we uses the key dimensions proposed by Peltier *et al.* and some other new, specific to dental industry.

The scoring system was designed in a way to reflect differences for the following eight dimensions:

- no response device/strong response device,
- awareness attitudes/response,
- uses imagery/ does not use imagery,
- uses emotion/uses reason,
- uses little information/much information,
- attitudes toward brand/attitudes toward product,
- high message frequency/low message frequency and
- high production values/low production values.

As we already underline before, in Romanian dental market are acting mainly the importers and distributors. This is the reason why in the present research, we have added another dimension (criteria) for the study: printed message/advertisement is promoting the manufacturer or the distributor. In our previous assessment we observed in a lot of cases when the distributor emphasize both on the producers brand and on the product. Our presumption was the following: *when the advertisements focus only on distributor, direct response orientation prevails.* In the same time, when the producer is most advertised, the image orientation is present.

For our purpose, an Osgood scale (semantic differential scale) was designed for evaluating the changes taking place in Romanian dental advertising in recent years.

Every dimension was assessed by five intervals where 1 means image-majority, 3 - balanced and 5 direct response-majority). Peltier *et al.* researches state that an *image majority advertisement* focuses on the image of the brand and the response devices are not compulsory. It can imply attitudes or emotion (happiness, love, sadness etc.). Also, an image advertisement has little (technical/specific) information, high production value (the highest quality materials, very good resolution, vivid colors, quality paper etc.). In an effort to build the image of the brand, the frequency of the message will be increased ( more than one advertisement per edition and one per each semester's edition of the magazine).

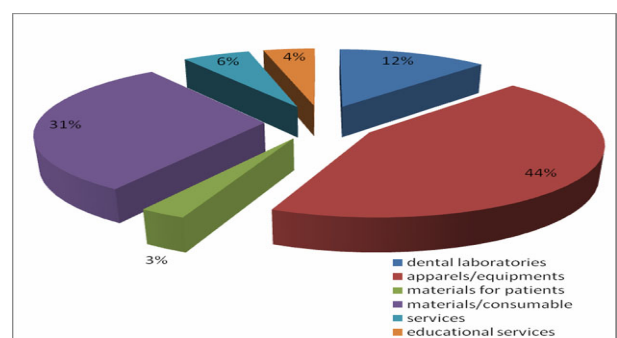


Fig. 1 The study's advertisements by type of products/services

In a *direct response majority advertisement*, the message can be communicated through different other devices than magazines, and the frequency in a year can be lower. The product is more important as opposed to the image of the brand. Moreover, in a direct response-majority advertisement, the focus is toward reasons to buy the product and not to create emotion. The direct response ad can include one or several response devices such as a reply card as well as a free phone number. The quality of production will not be as high as in an image-majority advertisement.

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data processed in SPSS 16 are synthesized in table 1, 2 and figure 2. Figure 1 display the analyzed advertisements by type of dental categories of products and services. A total of 748 dental related ads were examined, 93 for dental laboratory services, 329 for equipments, 21 for materials and supplies offered to the final consumer, 231 for materials and supplies offered to the practitioners, 32 for educational trainings, courses and 42 for other related services.

### A. Direct Response Advertising as a Marketing Tool for Dental Field

The most common direct response vehicle was postal addresses, web-page addresses and phone numbers. In 32% of the cases were also included the toll free number, the majority of them in 2010 editions. Only a few ads included a fax number in the ad. The average values were computed for each advertisement from the sample, displayed in table 1. If the mean score is between 1-2 points, we have considered that is image majority advertising. A balanced one has the score is between 2.01-3.99 points, and direct response advertising with a score between 4 and 5 points.

Surprisingly, after clustering all the advertisements based upon the mentioned 9 criteria, we can observe *strong response devices* (4.47 points). This means that almost every ad publishes at least three ways for contacting the provider.

Regarding image vs. direct response majority, although the evaluated ads had some sort of direct response device, *with the exception of materials for end-users, overall, advertisements was primarily balanced*. This evidence was expected given the early stage of development of both Romanian dental market and industry. Many dental equipment producers companies are multinationals and are focusing rather on brand's image, targeting sophisticated market segments. But, as opposed to materials and consumables, the products may differ, delivering a wide range of product benefits. Although image is important in delivering the

message to the target audience, reason comes more into play in the description of the product benefits.

Furthermore, the materials for patients are based on image advertising, which is often employed when there is little difference in the brands or prevails on products where the focus is on the personality associated with the brand name as opposed to product benefits (cosmetic dental products/services).

Table 1 Scores by each measured dimensions

Research dimensions	Mean	Std. Dev
response device	<b>4.47</b>	1.082
Awareness attitude/response	2.58	1.390
uses imagery/ do not uses imagery	2.75	1.047
uses emotion/reason	3.93	.996
uses information/ do not uses	2.89	1.194
attitudes toward brands/products	2.66	1.147
message frequency	3.54	1.275
production values high / low	<b>2.09</b>	1.334
Producer/Distributor	3.98	1.187
Valid N (list wise)		

In dental ads from the sample, the distributors prevail (mean score 3.98 points) and the main argument is rational, not emotional (3.93 points). This result was expected, dental equipments being more technical and high technology products. Ads highlight both the brand and the product and have a very good visual quality. Frequency of the messages is rather low in the same edition of the magazine but, during a year, it reaches a medium rate.

### B. Direct Response Advertising by Specific Category of Dental Products/Services

Analyzing in depth the degree of image vs. direct response orientation and grouping the different types of products/ services, we obtained mean scores depicted in table 2.

We find interesting the *materials for end-users* (patients) score 1.86 points, indicating that the ads is *image majority*. For the other category of equipments, scores range between 2.93 and 3.49, pointing a *balance ad*.

*Educational services* (trainings for practitioners, medical doctors and students or long term courses for learning the newest technologies), services provided by dental laboratory and other dental services (like cosmetic procedures) followed the same advertising pattern: at least four possibilities of response, balance between image and information, focus on services benefits and not on brand, very high production value.

Table 2 Direct response advertising scores by specific categories of dental products/services

Types of product/services advertisements	Mean	Std. Dev
dental laboratories	3.49	.822
apparels/equipments	3.39	1.120
materials for patients	1.86	1.047
materials/consumable	3.32	.934
services	3.02	1.043
educational services	2.93	1.211
Valid N (list wise)	748	

On the other hand, ads for *equipments and materials* seem to be similar too, with two exceptions: equipments account the highest response devices (mean score 4.79 points) and material ads are mainly based on reasons than emotions (4.19 points - the highest mean score from all categories).

The surprise comes from materials for patients (for example Lacalut Active). Those ads emphasize exclusively on image (1.24 points), the attitude is toward the brand only (1.98 points), an average of two prints per edition and the best quality from all sample (1 point!). All the request for an image majority are accomplished, even the poor response devices (1.52 points).

According to previous studies [17], cosmetics ads in Europe are fairly balanced. For dental cosmetics we have found an image orientation. This gap may come from the early stage of Romanian hygiene market development, mainly due to the very low level of consumer education in dental prevention and care, in comparison with the same indicator in more developed countries (West European markets) [20]. This means that brand consolidation strategy is recommended to the entry stage on the market.

### C. Direct Response Advertising Evolution in Time

In order to assessing the changes taking place in Romanian dental market, the research is covering a five years period (between 2006 and 2010). Over the five years period, the frequency of direct response advertisements doesn't show a significant seasonal pattern and a steady decrease in use over time. Most of the direct response advertisements are in the second semester of 2008, probably as a result of the dramatic increase of dental market in analyzed period. Direct response equipments ads were predominant during the last semester of every year. The reason could be the implementation of the predicted annually plan through budget validation. The most investments in equipments are made by the end of the year [6], when the company knows

the certain sales indicators. No pattern was apparent for direct response dental laboratory or services ads. We can observe that direct response ads for educational services are more frequent since 2008. Figure 2 depict direct response advertisements average score, during the mentioned period.

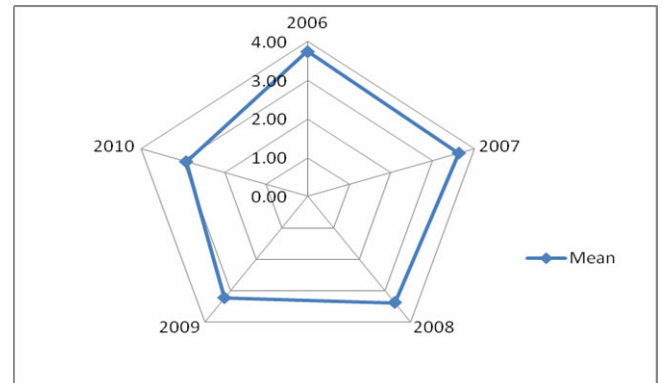


Fig. 2 The study's advertisements mean by years

The findings reveal a constant decrease in direct response ads dimensions every year (from a mean score of 3.89 points in 2006 to 2.03 points in 2010). Evaluating the average values for each analyzed criteria, we observe a disruptive evolution in dental message frequency and in persuasive ads messages (by using emotion or reason). If during the years 2006 and 2007 clearly prevails the rational reasons for argumentation (mean score 4.24 points, respectively 4.2 points), since 2009, the average value sharply decreases (to 2.58 points in 2010), meaning the emotions are use in a large extent.

Moreover, the same situation occurs in ads frequency by lowering the prints number in 2009 and 2010 (from a score mean 4.18 points in 2006, to 3.14 points in 2010).

The economic crisis could be the explanation for this phenomenon. In 2009, the dental market growth has diminished and the actors in the field have not invested in additional technologies in the same manner as in previous period. In the last two years, direct response advertising and image advertising become balanced. The providers are focusing more and more on brands consolidation.

This situation is atypical taking into consideration the best practice in advertising. As we have mentioned already, the existing research demonstrate that efficiency for industrial product/services consist in two steps: building the brand first, and after that developing direct-response advertising. Although, the advertising strategies implemented by Romanian dental actors followed the opposite trends. During the expansion period of the entire economy, the producers/distributors obtained unexpected results in terms of sales with no (or little) additional efforts.

But, in 2009, when the crisis effects have affected Romanian markets, their sales begun to stagnate. The crisis sharpens the competition battle and the dental providers were constraint to adapt rapidly their strategies. We think this is the reason why they have begun just recently to plan and implement advertising strategies, based on brand image.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

The general conclusion of the study is the following: dental materials, equipments and services use balanced advertising, while image prevails in materials for patients advertisements. Through this integrative approach, employing direct response along with image based strategies, advertisers can achieve a positive brand image as well as increase sales. Lately, the most prevalent direct response vehicles included local phone numbers and web addresses of where to purchase the brand. In the effort of integrating direct response vehicles, dental companies should include customer service strategies to handle the influx of product inquiry calls. For being more effective, dental providers should emphasize first on brand and after that on direct response advertising. The economic crisis has changed the pattern in dental advertising, mainly by focusing rather on emotion than on rational reason and by lowering the frequency rate.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

The author future actions will be: 1) to check through specific marketing research means in what degree the distributors and producers from dental field have achieved their objectives through the implemented image/response advertising campaign. 2) Future research might look at the other European Countries and find correlations between the rate of image/response orientation in dental field.

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