



Research Article

LEVERAGING A MULTI-CHANNEL MARKETING STRATEGY IN RETAIL PHARMACIES TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE EDGE

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INTRODUCTION

The level of German healthcare is under increasing pressure and the demands for reform are outstripping the actual approaches of recent years. This problem has already been recognised by the National Association of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians. It pointed out an increasing shortage of doctors many years ago^[1]. But even in the 2020s, specialist doctors are still visible as a shortage in the lists of the Federal Employment Agency [2] In addition, the number of retail pharmacies is falling [3] and will fall below 18,000 for the first time in 2023 [4]. In addition, there are problems with the financing of statutory health insurance funds and necessary reforms in the private hospital sector [5]. The problem of staff shortages also remains omnipresent in all areas of healthcare [6].

The corona pandemic, which has acted as a catalyst for the development of digital health solutions and services across Europe, has galvanised planning and implementation. The need for better preparedness for emergent crises for greater integration at EU level in the health sector lies in information sharing and research at EU level in pandemics and the success of collaboration in the development of digital tools [7]. However, a real breakthrough in digitalisation on a par with the still dominant analogue services, possibilities and instruments is still pending in the healthcare system in Germany. In 2023, the German healthcare system was still rated poorly by the German Council of Healthcare Experts in the area of comprehensive resilience. The experts stated:

“The pandemic in particular has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of our healthcare system, not least the inadequate utilisation of digital possibilities. [...] Our healthcare system is not sufficiently prepared for either the consequences of climate change or pandemics. This also applies to other known and

- probably even more so - unknown crisis-related challenges. This cannot be allowed to continue.” [8].

EU are far ahead in this respect. There is now an infrastructure for the use of electronic patient records and electronic prescriptions [9]. However, the rapid expansion is stagnating due to errors in telematics and low acceptance [10]. Above all, it is clear that tools, methods and new processes are being introduced without the users concerned [11].

For retail pharmacies in particular, it is necessary to break new ground as their stock in Germany continues to decline and online competitors are gaining market share and have already fully adapted to the use of digital channels as a business strategy. This results in a need for action for retail pharmacies, as they can no longer operate as they did until 2004¹, which is also reflected in the steadily dwindling sales opportunities in the presence. There must be a reaction that creates an expanded presence as a market participant and goes hand in hand with a change in marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As early as 1995, Berry emphasised the importance of efficient marketing tactics for the implementation of a multi-channel marketing strategy in his article published in the journal Academy of Marketing Science [12]. The reason for this is that multi-channel marketing (MCM) involves addressing customers via different channels and creating a strong brand identity.

For 2017, the following results were collected by ALIUD in the area of pharmacy marketing on a digital level. According to this, of 300 retail pharmacies surveyed, 29% said that digital marketing had generated little or no success. Another 29% report very good results and see their campaigns as a success. 27% see improved sales as a result of the measures. Cooperation

¹ The Act on the Modernisation of Statutory Health Insurance (GMG) in 2004 lifted the ban on the mail-order sale of medicines, which now also included prescription medicines. The European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that mail-order sales are permissible in the single market of the European Union (EU) (ECJ Luxembourg NJW 2004, 131, 136).

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with wholesalers and manufacturers is very much in demand, as they already offer ready-made concepts and require little investment. Own initiative in the form of a comprehensive in-house management approach is still rare [13].

This is in line with the principles outlined by Batra, Aaker and Myers, who emphasise the importance of knowing your internal capabilities when developing advertising campaigns [14]. However, especially in the area of digital opportunities, the level of knowledge of employees is low, which makes MCM of analogue and digital advertising difficult and sometimes even prevents it [15].

Other studies have emphasised the importance of marketing in the implementation of medication management (MCM) strategies in retail pharmacies. Hassali et al [16] found that marketing plays a crucial role in the implementation of MCM strategy in retail pharmacies in Malaysia. It emphasises the importance of allocating resources and making significant efforts to develop effective marketing strategies in order to succeed in a highly competitive market. Waddington et al [17] also found that effective marketing strategies can assist Australian pharmacies to implement MCM strategies.

In addition, Rollins and Perri [18] discuss in their publication the benefits of marketing in the pharmaceutical industry, such as product positioning, brand management and regulatory compliance. Half of the retail pharmacies surveyed used external consultancies for their promotional campaigns, suggesting that these pharmacies were looking for specialised expertise. This finding is also in line with the recommendations of Paul W. Farris et al. which emphasises the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of advertising campaigns using metrics such as market research, customer segmentation, customer lifetime value and return on investment [19]. Schrage also confirms the need for marketing specialists for pharmaceutical companies [20] p. 63).

The study by Cheraghali [21] also analysed the marketing channels used by retail pharmacies. Cheraghali found that retail pharmacies mainly rely on personal selling and advertising.

Schrage [20] states for the German market that government regulations make an MCM in the pharmacy sector worthwhile for the OTC and private label product groups. She sees a strong position only if there is linear communication between all relevant participants in the entire value chain in order to generate success.

The choice of channels often depends on the preferences of the target group. They therefore need to understand their target group and align their marketing efforts accordingly. The studies show that there is no standardised marketing concept for pharmacies, but that retail pharmacies in different countries use a mix of marketing channels depending on the preferences of their target group. They need to know the preferences of their target customers in order to develop marketing strategies that appeal to them.

OBJECTIVE

Retail pharmacies have a systemically relevant position for the supply of medicines and medical advice. However, with digital technology and online retailing, they need to change their traditional business model. In order to compete with online

sellers and direct-to-consumer brands, retail pharmacies need to revise their marketing tactics. Therefore, this paper analyses how retail pharmacies can reposition themselves with their own MCMs. To this end, Porter's five forces model is used to analyse the pharmacy industry and determine market positions. It analyses the bargaining power of customers and suppliers, the level of competition and the risk of new competitors. The following research questions were formulated for the analysis:

1. What factors need to be considered when implementing an MCM strategy in retail pharmacies?
2. How can the pharmacy market be analysed using Porter's Five Forces model to determine the position of retail pharmacies in the market?
3. What are the most effective MCM strategy options that can be communicated through targeted marketing?
4. What expectations do customers and retail pharmacies have of the MCM strategy and how are they being realised?
5. What strategic opportunities for pharmacies can be recognised from the customer perspective and how can these be used to develop a successful MCM strategy?

The research questions aim to address specific aspects of implementing an MCM strategy in retail pharmacies, such as identifying factors to consider when implementing an MCM strategy, identifying effective MCM strategy options for targeted marketing, and understanding customer and retail pharmacy expectations and MCM strategy implementation. The research will provide insights into how retail pharmacies can increase their market positioning and sales through a well-structured MCM strategy. The LCAG scheme is applied in a solution-oriented manner. The following hypotheses were formulated for the research:

H1: Marketing plays an important role for retail pharmacies in their operational business.

H2: There is a very close connection between the pharmacies' own marketing strategy and that of their customers.

H3: The use of different marketing strategies for different generations is not available or planned in the majority of retail pharmacies.

H4: The creation of brand awareness on the part of pharmaceutical suppliers correlates significantly positively with the general importance of marketing.

Methodological approach and materials

Empirical data collection

In the present research area of MCM in retail pharmacies, there are only a few research approaches for Germany that provide adequate results. For the research gap, it was recognised that it is necessary to collect valid data due to the lack of data. The aim of the empirical quantitative approach is to gain objective and measurable insights into the phenomenon under investigation. To apply this approach, the data is then analysed using statistical methods to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the variables under investigation [22].

Two cohorts (pharmacy managers and their customers) were selected for the empirical research approach. The group

size for the pharmacists was set at approx. 2% of all market participants (approx. 380 pharmacists in absolute figures) and for the customers at the fully analysed questionnaires of at least 1,000 customers without specifying certain characteristics (gender, age, profession, etc.). The survey was conducted in mid-2023. The aim was to achieve an appropriate sample size that would allow an approximate generalisation of the results. Two questionnaires were developed for the empirical survey of customers of retail pharmacies and the owners of these pharmacies, the structure of which allows the parameters surveyed to be compared.

The customer questionnaire contains the following question areas:

- Purchase of medicinal products in relation to sources
- Reference to information on medication, intake, etc.
- Perception of advertising for medical products
- Advertising perception of retail pharmacies
- Media preferences

For owners of retail pharmacies, the structure is as follows:

- Evaluation and importance of marketing
- Conception, planning and realisation of own marketing measures
- Media channels served
- Generative and group-specific differentiation

Each individual category is supported by several questions and can be compared with each other in overarching parameters using the categories of the two questionnaires. This makes it possible to compare the utilisation and expectations of customers with the utilisation and implementation of pharmacy owners. As a result, it should be possible to determine whether the pharmacies' marketing offers correspond to those of the customers. As it is assumed that this is not the case, this is determined by inferential statistical analysis of the results.

Industry analysis according to Porter

According to Porter, the barriers to entry into an industry are linked to the following factors. The size of a company as it competes with established companies. This refers to overall performance relative to unit cost, which determines the scale at which a product competes with others. Differences here are in quality, service and price. In the case of retail pharmacies, there are legal requirements for pharmacy premises. These are minimum requirements that must be met from the outset. The difference is therefore not as great as in other sectors. In addition, pharmacy teams of 5 to 30 employees tend to be small and specialised in pharmacy knowledge.

For pharmacies, price is not a determining factor due to legal obligations, meaning that only quality and services are decisive [23]. RX medicines are highly standardised and the prices for these product groups are not interchangeable, so the additional services are decisive [24]. The services are geared towards the customer's entire purchase process (before - during - after purchase). The situation is different for OTC medicines, which are purchased by customers on their own initiative. As no prescription is required, the products are purchased directly from the pharmacy. MCM measures are particularly effective here [20]. If the company is in a strategic area and its economic performance is lower than that of established companies, it is

to be expected in most cases that the company will not be able to gain a foothold. Companies can only achieve economies of scale if factors such as investment capital, machinery, personnel, etc. are at the level of the established or even the leading companies in the industry [25].

If a new competitor wants to enter the market, it can only do so if either its product is better than that of established companies or if it can achieve a cost advantage for customers with the same quality. Retail pharmacies have comparable product ranges and it is difficult to assert oneself against other competitors in this area through the uniqueness of products. Individual product groups, such as private labels, can generate an advantage here through marketing. Otherwise, products that are not bound by the Pharmaceutical Price Ordinance should be advertised as an advantage through price [26].

A company's available capital is also a barrier to entry into sectors. Capitalisation can make a difference for retail pharmacies, as they invest a lot of their own capital and rely less on external financing via loans [27]. Insufficient equity can be a barrier here [28] (Barbosa et al., 2020). Pharmacists who already operate flourishing pharmacies can build up regional supply power by expanding via a branch structure. If a supra-regional supply is to be created, the only option for these pharmacies is the mail-order option with a corresponding online connection. DocMorris has established itself as the market leader among online providers and has bought up many existing online pharmacies in order to stabilise this position. This was made possible by the capital strength of Zur Rose AG, the parent company behind DocMorris [29]. Such third-party ownership situations with investment capital are prohibited by law for retail pharmacies in Germany.

According to Porter, switching costs are originally defined as the connection between companies in the value chain. This includes raw material suppliers, suppliers of semi-finished products and components, logistics providers and external service providers. Suppliers are not considered in the case of retail pharmacies, as there are also clear legal requirements for wholesalers as suppliers [30]. (Preißner et al., 2018). The bargaining power of suppliers is only directly noticeable in the case of a monopoly or a very limited oligopoly. The dependent company is then not in a position to unilaterally impose conditions, but must orientate itself very strongly towards the suppliers [25]. Within the supplier structure in the pharmaceutical sector, these market constellations are excluded by law from the outset. Manufacturers and, above all, wholesalers are forced to supply pharmacies several times a day. If products are not available, there is the option of switching to another wholesaler, who must then also be able to supply products that comply with the provisions of the discount agreements with the health insurance funds [31]. Only if the product from the discount agreement is not available can an alternative product with the same mode of action and quality be passed on. The health insurance fund is then obliged to discount the medicine at a different (usually higher) price and reimburse the pharmacy.

The state as a regulator and legislator with binding effect is also to be understood as a barrier to entry. Compliance with all regulations is essential, as they must be fulfilled as the basis for procedures, processes and their legality. In the pharmacy

market, the state acts as a strong regulatory institution, as the healthcare landscape as a whole is socially relevant and must be protected. The requirements for pharmacies are largely standardised regardless of the form of distribution and only differ in terms of shipping and terms and conditions [32].

Retail pharmacies may not be able to secure direct cost advantages by focussing on new sales channels, but they do have the opportunity to retain customers longer and more firmly. At the same time, they can gain new customers through a broader presence and thus achieve market advantages in terms of demand. Subsequent advantages could only arise through the process and the use of resources, for example by offering a service more cheaply or even free of charge (BMI determination, blood pressure measurement, etc.).

In the pharmacy retail sector, the customer dominates as the end consumer [25]. With their demand for suppliers' products, customers determine the market power of the respective companies. Perception is determined by the marketing and channels used by a company. Multi-channel strategies are a good way for companies to present themselves with corresponding innovations or services, especially when launching new products or realigning existing strategies [33].

Customers can digitally rate a company and its services and indicate what is good or bad about services and products. They can spread virally and influence wide circles of customers both positively and negatively. The companies that are present must therefore constantly adapt if they want to continue to retain customers with their strategy [28](Barbosa et al., 2020). If customers are confronted with a negative experience with the product or company, they will refrain from the offer in the future [24]. Market transparency therefore reflects the knowledge of buyers in the market: if there is a high level of market transparency, a clear choice can be made with the knowledge of many or even all providers. Such perceptions also extend to comparisons of quality, service and price. The use of comparison portals or the simple comparison of two providers can already determine the customer's willingness to buy via the three parameters mentioned [25].

Product substitution is a matter of course in many sectors when it comes to polypoles. It becomes more difficult for the customer when there are only a few suppliers. Substitution as a barrier to market entry in the sectors proves to be difficult for companies. They must offer the same quality, a lower price and the same service [25]. These are minimum requirements if substitution is to be achieved. Such cases occur when patents expire and new suppliers enter the segment. Similarly, large suppliers can bring a substitution offer to the market if there are no patent infringements [24]. In the case of pharmaceuticals, substitution is more difficult because, on the one hand, innovations are patent-protected and, on the other, the health insurance funds conclude contracts with the manufacturers, meaning that the end customer cannot exert any influence. In the latter case, pharmacies are obliged to dispense these and no other medicines for the respective members of the health insurance funds. This can only be changed in the event of an inability to supply (Mondragon et al., 2019). In most economic sectors, state regulations are the guarantors of infrastructural framework conditions to ensure a liberal economy. These include transport infrastructures,

communication infrastructures and legal safeguards that regulate trade and production. These framework conditions are more strictly regulated for certain economic sectors when it comes to vital and critical infrastructures that ensure the safety and well-being of the population. In such cases, subsidies, state ownership of companies and strict access restrictions are the means by which the state intervenes in economic sectors (Conrad, 2022).

For the pharmacy sector, the barriers to market entry are particularly high and include many regulations that must also be strictly adhered to in normal business operations. These include the highest principles² :

- Obligation to supply citizens with medicines (especially RX medicines)
- Permanent on-call duty (night and emergency services)
- Obligation to contract in relation to regulations
- Securing the medication requirements for one week
- Freedom of establishment with simultaneous district border principle
- Limitation of multiple ownership (max. four retail pharmacies in one district)
- Prohibition of ownership by third parties (prohibition of third-party ownership)
- Control function of drugsafety

The five forces must be considered selectively for the pharmacy sector in some areas and are completely absent in some points due to the special focus on the distribution of medicines and other services.

Based on the findings of the industry, the retail pharmacy must be able to make strategic decisions that determine marketing success. The LCAG scheme is used in this context, as it also includes a sustainability component, particularly in the systemically relevant area of pharmaceutical supply. This is not only to be understood in the sense of environmentally friendly principles, but must above all include sustainability for patients, their safety and for the public healthcare system.

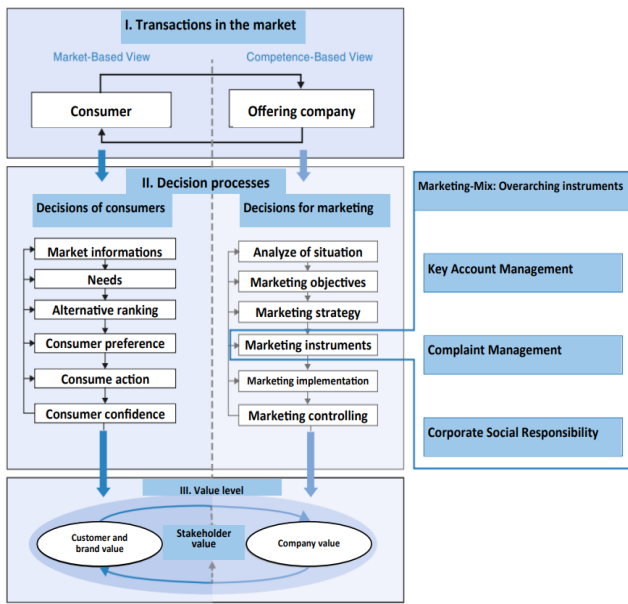
MCM

In a separate definition approach, MCM is understood as the expansion of retail pharmacy sales to include digital communication and marketing levels that address different customer groups according to their needs and requirements, without compromising the quality of performance, advice and service in the retail pharmacy and generating added value for the pharmacy's own business.

The necessary perspectives and their content parameters for a marketing mix are shown in Figure 1. It compares customer expectations and behaviours as well as the measures taken by companies to address them. The structure of customers must be identified so that the most important customer groups become visible and the measures are successful [33]. The entire identification and implementation process spans three 2 Framework laws and regulations are the Pharmacy Act (ApoG), the Pharmacy Operating Regulations (ApBetrO), the Medicinal Products Act (AMG) and, in terms of commercial law, the German Commercial Code (HGB).

levels, which are directly linked in terms of their impact.

Figure 1 Analysis and measures taken by companies in marketing in response to customers



Source:[33]

The focus on the marketing mix in this study is tied to retail pharmacies, which already have a dominant sales channel (face-to-face sales) and use established, but mostly analogue communication channels. There is little differentiation in terms of products compared to the competition, but they can be differentiated according to customer groups (age, gender, generation, medical conditions, etc.) [34]. However, many pharmacists in the retail segment do not implement this. There is a lack of knowledge of marketing tools for strategic and operational marketing management [35] (Christel and Gründinger, 2019). With the MCM approach in combination with the LCAG scheme, this research aims to present an appropriate and realisable approach.

There are demands placed on pharmacies by the introduction of MCMs, but there are also advantages for customers. Customers have increased access to medical products, while pharmacies with an MCM must accurately determine each individual channel for its effectiveness and benefits [36]. This reflects the reality of pharmacists who, due to the complexity of the MCM and their lower level of knowledge, find it difficult to build digital business models that correspond to a no-line retail and allow the customer full access on all channels [37].

Multi-channel marketing takes into account all marketing tools that can be used in a specific industry. It represents the intention to address potential or existing consumers and consumers of a company via differentiated communication and sales channels [38].

What needs to be considered in order to introduce a successful multi-channel strategy?

- Coherence: In marketing, consumers expect marketing components that fit together and make the company unmistakable.
- The channels should be efficient in their interaction and convey a consistent, clear message that everyone

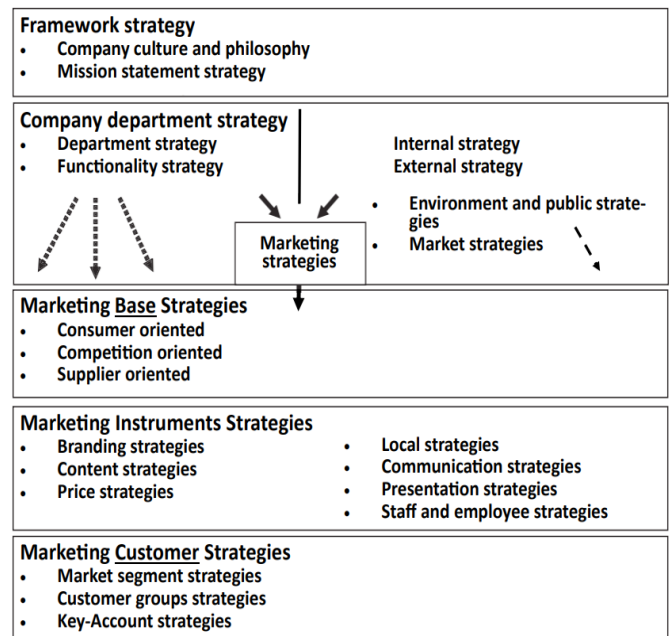
can understand [39].

- Each individual advertising medium and each individual channel has a specific meaning. They must therefore all be given equal attention and used coherently. If certain channels are favoured and others neglected, the entire campaign cannot be successful.
- The effectiveness of each channel must be checked in advance. Channels that do not generate sufficient response should be eliminated [40].

Marketing in sensitive product areas, which require a high level of attention to usage information and advice in addition to pure product information, is closely linked to the provision of information [41].

In pharmacies, one of the main problems is that customers can use online offers more easily than a visit to the shop. Medicine is a need, not an event, and medicine as a product is mostly a forced demand due to illness [42]. Brand loyalty is rare and can only be found with OTC products or in the marginal product range. It is necessary to carry out strategic planning in such a way that it has at least a medium-term security of existence, but still has a certain flexibility to be able to react to changes in the environment and in the market [43]. Strategic multi-channel marketing is an important aspect of strategic management that enables companies to achieve marketing goals by using specific channels to reach the target market. To this end, a hierarchy formation is recommended in the strategic orientation, which brings a company closer to the desired goal step by step. The hierarchies can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Hierarchies of strategic planning for marketing areas in the company



Source: [43]

Strategic multi-channel advertising therefore involves combining different marketing channels to offer services, products and benefits to customers across all channels. With the advent of new technologies and systems, companies should now adopt a multi-channel technique to remain competitive in the market [44]. This is especially true for retail pharmacies in Germany.

In addition, strategic multi-channel marketing allows companies to track and analyse customer data, giving them valuable insights into their customers' capabilities and behaviour. These facts can then be used to refine and optimise their marketing efforts to ensure they reach the right target market with the right message at the right time. In this context, the healthcare market is generally recognised as having a high benefit function in the multi-channel sector. These are mainly aimed at improving the quality of services provided to patients and the relationship between the healthcare organisation and patients [41]. However, implementing a strategic multi-channel marketing approach can be difficult, especially for small and medium-sized organisations with limited resources [24]. This is where the LCAG scheme is intended to provide a planning framework.

LCAG scheme

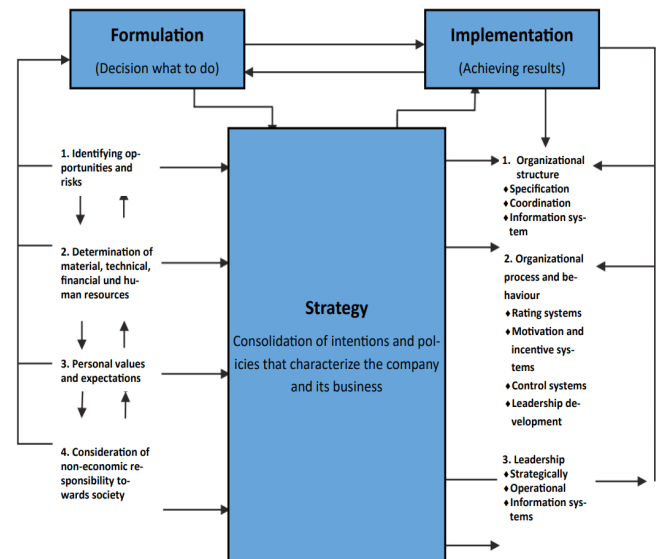
The LCAG scheme is considered an extension of the earlier Ansoff approach from the 1960s, which was revised in the 1980s [45]. The Ansoff approach was conceived as an instrument for companies for strategic planning with the core focus on a growth strategy. In a further elaboration, a clear conception of the implementation of strategic measures for the desired growth strategy was then developed [43]. In order to establish this strategy as an efficient corporate structure, it focuses on the following core tasks:

- Development of entrepreneurial skills: Developing an entrepreneurial culture within the organisation, i.e. promoting internal entrepreneurship.
- Diagnosis of general management capability: According to Köhler and Zerfass [46], the diagnosis of management capability includes the diagnosis of the prevailing management culture (values and attitudes of managers), management expertise (problem-solving skills; power structures, etc.) and the functional capability of the company (expertise; potential and resources in the functional areas).
- Strategic planning of attitude changes: The strategy-orientated change of potentials and capacities.
- Ensuring the coexistence of competitive and entrepreneurial activities: Balanced pursuit of operational vs. strategic goals; dealing with strategic flexibility vs. operational control, e.g. through a dual budgeting system (strategic and operational budget).
- Approaches to managing discontinuous changes: Dealing with resistance during strategy implementation, dealing with conflicts, crisis management.

With this theoretical approach, which can be understood as holistic, Ansoff realigned strategic management in research and no longer focussed only on partial elements [47]. This created a step towards strategic management involving the entire value chain of companies, the basic idea of which is being taken up again in modified and revised new approaches [48]. However, other researchers criticise the strategy concept for being too technocratic and, in particular, for lacking behaviour-oriented approaches to strategy formulation, implementation and execution. Therefore, the LCAG scheme according to Learned, Christensen, Andrews and Guth was used, as it includes the behavioural aspects. These were also seen as particularly

relevant to pharmacy retailing and the implementation of MCM as a strategic factor in this particular sector. The concept of holistic strategy management developed at Harvard Business School for the American region is essentially based on the Ansoff approach. However, the researchers have separated the areas of strategy formulation and subsequent implementation [49], which is illustrated graphically in the overall concept in Figure 3 as follows.

Figure 3 LCAG scheme in modified form



Source: Own presentation based on [50]

The selection of this model is based on the entirety of the strategic approach, the integration of behavioural factors and the possibility of implementation in the structure of a retail pharmacy in order to determine the possibilities of an MCM approach. Welge et al. [50] name the relevant influencing variables and activities that flow into the LCAG scheme, which are used to identify opportunities and risks. They emphasise the technological, ecological and economic influencing factors in a temporal dimension and the resource potential in an industry analysis. With regard to human resources, they assume that not only the management but also the employees are included in the analysis. In addition, the social responsibility that the company assumes and formulates as a corporate philosophy must also be taken into account when formulating the strategy.

Although it is an early model of strategic management and there are more precise models and approaches, it represents the best approach as a basis for the methodology used in this research, as the model and its application have not yet been applied to retail pharmacies, but is highly adaptable. Gerpott [51] formulates the advantages as follows:

- “Strategic decision-making is a conscious, rational decision-making process.
- Responsibility for the strategy process lies with top management
- The process should be as simple and formalised as possible (sequential sequence of clearly defined phases).
- The strategy formulation ends with a fully specified strategy.
- Strategy is explicitly formulated and can be formulated.

- Strategy formulation and strategy implementation must be kept strictly separate and distinct from each other.
- Strategies must fit the individual situation of a company and be the result of rational action, taking into account the respective circumstances.

Other models and theoretical approaches are very much concerned with manufacturing industries or focus on industries that are not subject to such a strict regulatory structure as the pharmacy sector [52]. Particular attention is paid to the area of social responsibility [53], which is proving to be decisive in the healthcare sector. It also addresses the factors that are assumed to hinder the transition of retail pharmacies to more MCM. These are finances, personnel, technical equipment and knowledge of these technical requirements in order to implement more digitalisation for MCM [49].

Testing the hypotheses

H1: Marketing for retail pharmacies plays an important role.

The results of the analysis of hypothesis 1 using the statistical analysis software SPSS (version 26) are shown below. As can be seen from Figure 4 below, the results of the chi-square test for the goodness of fit are significant because . Thus, the categories “important” and “very important” are indeed the leading categories.

Figure 4 Statistics for the test with the chi-square to analyse hypothesis 1

Statistic for test	
Chi square	15.833 ^a
df	2
Asymptotic significance	0.000

a. Less than 5 frequencies are expected for 0 cells (0.0%). The smallest expected cell frequency is 60.0.

Source: own presentation, 2023

Conclusion: Hypothesis 1 is confirmed. According to the respondents, marketing plays an important role for retail pharmacies.

The results of the questionnaire indicate that H1 is supported by the data. The majority of pharmacists surveyed stated that they consider marketing to be important or very important for their pharmacy. In addition, a significant percentage of respondents stated that they use various (mostly analogue) marketing channels, indicating the importance of marketing to their business. Marketing plays a critical role in the success of retail pharmacies and they should prioritise their marketing efforts to optimise profitability and provide value to their customers. The null hypothesis can be rejected based on the results of the questionnaire.

H2: There is a very close connection between the pharmacies’ own marketing strategy and that of the pharmaceutical companies.

The results of the analysis of hypothesis 2 are shown below. As can be seen in Figure 5 below, the results of the chi-square goodness of fit test are significant because . Thus, the “close” and “very close” categories are indeed the leading

ones.

Illustration 5 Statistics for the test with chi-square analysis of hypothesis 2

Statistic for test	
Chi square	17.733 ^a
df	3
Asymptotic significance	0.000

a. Less than 5 frequencies are expected for 0 cells (0.0%). The smallest expected cell frequency is 45.0.

Source: own presentation, 2023

Conclusion: Hypothesis 2 is confirmed. There is a very close correlation between the retail pharmacies’ own marketing strategy and that of the pharmaceutical companies.

The results of the questionnaire indicate that the hypothesis that there is a very close link between the retail pharmacies’ own marketing strategy and that of the pharmaceutical companies is supported. More than 60% of respondents stated that they maintain close or very close partnerships with pharmaceutical companies in the sense of linking their own marketing with that of the companies. Only around 15% of respondents stated that they only take part in the training offered, while around 20% stated that they utilise consultancy services. These results suggest that pharmaceutical companies play an important role in shaping the marketing strategies of retail pharmacies. The results of this hypothesis have implications for the optimal functioning of retail pharmacies, as the marketing strategies of pharmaceutical companies can have a significant impact on the profitability and success of these businesses. It is important that these pharmacies have a clear understanding of their relationships with pharmaceutical companies and carefully consider the impact of these partnerships on their marketing strategies. In addition, these findings may be useful for pharmaceutical companies to better understand the role they play in shaping the marketing strategies of their partner pharmacies.

H3: The use of different marketing strategies for different generations is present or planned in the majority of retail pharmacies.

The results of the analysis of hypothesis 4 are shown below. As can be seen from Figure 6, the results of the chi-square test for the goodness of fit are significant because . Accordingly, the categories “yes” and “planned” are indeed the leading ones.

Figure 6 Statistics for the test with the chi-square to analyse hypothesis 4

Statistic for test	
Chi square	8.933 ^a
df	2
Asymptotic significance	0.011

a. Less than 5 frequencies are expected for 0 cells (0.0%). The smallest expected cell frequency is 60.0.

Source: own presentation, 2023

Conclusion: Hypothesis 4 is confirmed. The use of different marketing strategies for different generations is not systematically present in the majority of retail pharmacies or is still being planned. However, it should be noted that the proportion of planned projects is very high, meaning that only a small proportion of them are currently actually pursuing different marketing strategies for different generations. Nevertheless, the result shows that the awareness and adaptability of the sector is beginning to align with changing customer needs: Each generation has different preferences, communication channels and expectations of products and services. By adapting their marketing strategies to these specific needs, retail pharmacies can ensure an effective and customised approach. The importance of these targeted marketing strategies is that they allow pharmacies to reach their target audience more efficiently and build stronger customer loyalty. By catering to the needs and preferences of each generation, pharmacies can select relevant content, offers and communication channels. This can range from the use of traditional media such as print adverts or brochures for older generations to the use of social media and online marketing for younger generations. A targeted marketing strategy for different generations also allows pharmacies to communicate their messages and services more effectively. By customising language, imagery and channels, they can increase the trust and relevance of their offerings to different generations. This can have a positive impact on customer acquisition, customer loyalty and ultimately the success of retail pharmacies.

H4: The creation of brand awareness on the part of pharmaceutical suppliers correlates significantly positively with the general importance of marketing.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis of the paper is analysed. This is a correlation analysis.

Figure 7 Correlation with Spearman-Rho hypothesis 4

Correlations			
Spearman-Rho		How important do you rate marketing and marketing approaches for dispensary pharmacies?	Exist in your concept for marketing a creation of brand awareness of the pharmacy manufacturer?
	Correlation coefficient	1.000	- 0.213**
	Significance (two sided)	.	0.004
	N	180	180
	Correlation coefficient	- 0.213**	1.000
	Significance (two sided)	0.004	.
	N	180	180

** . The correlation is on the 0.01 level significant (two sided).

Source: own presentation, 2023

Figure 7 shows that the correlation coefficient is on average. The negative signal can be explained by the different coding of the variables. The value is also significant because . There is therefore a positive mean correlation between the two questions: if brand awareness is important, marketing is generally important and vice versa.

Conclusion: Hypothesis 4 is confirmed. The creation of brand awareness on the part of pharmaceutical suppliers correlates significantly positively with the general importance of marketing. The confirmation of this hypothesis shows that strong brand awareness on the part of pharmaceutical

suppliers is closely linked to the appreciation and importance of marketing. Strong brand awareness enables companies to stand out from the competition, build a unique image and gain the trust of customers. The significance of these findings is that strong brand awareness can help pharmaceutical suppliers to be more effective in their marketing efforts.

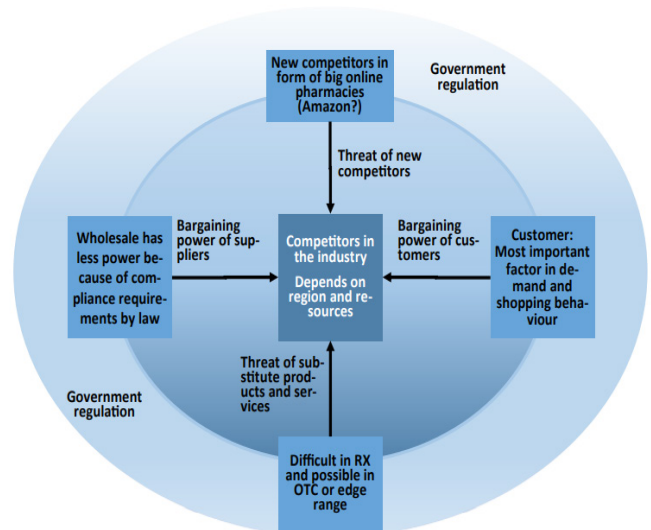
DISCUSSION

The retail pharmacy is not directly in the customer’s mind if it is not a favourite regular pharmacy. Rather, it is the pharmacy in general that the customer sees with their medication supply. This can be illustrated with a simple, everyday example that customers “have to go to the retail pharmacy”. Hedonism is not associated with a retail pharmacy because the visit is associated with illness and suffering [54]. Rarely is the specific name of the pharmacy mentioned, so there remains an anonymity and retail pharmacies should try to step out of this and promote themselves as individual businesses. By implementing effective marketing strategies, they can reach their target groups, create brand awareness and promote customer loyalty.

The results of the survey show that the majority of respondents believe that marketing is crucial for retail pharmacies when implementing a medication management strategy. This emphasises the role of marketing in the success of retail pharmacies and the importance of collaboration between retail pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies in developing effective marketing campaigns. These findings have practical implications for both parties as they highlight the importance of prioritising marketing efforts to optimise profitability.

To be successful in a competitive market, retail pharmacies need to prioritise marketing in their business strategies and allocate sufficient resources to marketing activities [55]. Developing effective marketing strategies involves creating marketing plans, setting budgets and identifying target audiences for promotional campaigns. Industry analysis is the first step in the planning process. Based on Porter’s Five Forces, the model for retail pharmacies is as follows.

Figure 8 Porter model for the retail pharmacy sector



Source: Figure adapted in content and design (2024), but based on [56]

The most important questions and conditions to be answered/analysed by pharmacists are:

- Internal competition from other pharmacies in the neighbouring areas.
- Offers and unique selling points of the competition. Where is there a gap in the offering?
- Which customers should be addressed and how?
- What is the potential customer structure in the target areas?
- How can the products be passed on to new customers?
- Are there opportunities for customer contact in addition to the physical presence?
- Do resources need to be expanded (availability of personnel, technical expertise and infrastructure)?
- Determination of customer behaviour in terms of demand with mail-order pharmacies.
- Compliance with official regulations.
- New requirements for suppliers.

Cheung and McColl-Kennedy [57] emphasised the importance of developing a marketing plan for retail pharmacies to successfully implement MCM services.

Retail pharmacies also need to keep up with the latest marketing trends and technologies to stay competitive. As digital marketing channels such as social media, email marketing and search engine optimisation (SEO) become increasingly popular, pharmacies that use these channels skilfully have a good chance of holding their own in the market [33, 58, 59].

Based on all these factors to be considered, the research question “What factors need to be considered when implementing an MCM strategy in retail pharmacies?” is answered and helps pharmacy owners to plan a structured MCM for their own branch. Many retail pharmacies seem to fail because they have to consider many aspects for the design of a presence and at the same time have to devote human resources to the maintenance of such offers, which are very often not available.

The research results clearly show how important it is for retail pharmacies to carefully evaluate their approach to creating advertising campaigns. In addition, there is a need for category management in the OTC sector that allows advertising to focus on these products. This would provide a better overview, especially in-store, but at the same time limit the possibilities of placing many products in the visual and free selection. The advertised products would therefore be bought more, but other impulse purchases would be suppressed because they are not directly visible in the range. Here it is important for retail pharmacies to establish which products are in greater demand in a particular season, for example, what the customer structure is like and how to adapt the layout accordingly. Pharmacies need to know their customers and be able to respond to their wishes and needs [60].

“Dealing with this aspect of modern pharmacy management requires knowledge of the market and the product range, consideration of business data, training of the team, in short: time and expertise. Pharmacy cooperatives can provide valuable support here, especially if this is not just in the form of brochures and guidelines, but through active, personal and

systematic support for the pharmacy owner and their team on site.” [61].

Research emphasises the importance of cooperation between retail pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies in marketing. Networks of cooperation between relevant market players are becoming increasingly decisive for competition [62, 63]

The example of Pfizer and BioNTech working together to develop and distribute the mRNA-based vaccine against COVID-19 shows how important and complex partnership agreements are when it comes to securing strong growth for the partners and making innovative and high-quality medicines available to millions of patients worldwide. More than half of all late-stage pharmaceutical projects rely on external collaborations [64]. Therefore, it is crucial to manage partnerships carefully to ensure they are ethical, fair and beneficial to all parties. The nature of partnerships between retail pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies in marketing is complex and multi-layered [65]. According to Tripathi et al. [65], pharmaceutical companies often rely on retail pharmacies to market and distribute their products to consumers. Retail pharmacies, in turn, benefit from carrying a wide range of products from different pharmaceutical companies to attract and retain customers.

Critics argue that the close relationship between pharmaceutical companies and retail pharmacies could compromise the impartiality of pharmacists when recommending medicines to patients [66]. In addition, some pharmaceutical companies may use aggressive marketing tactics that prioritise profit over patient welfare, which would have a negative impact on the retail pharmacy’s reputation. Partnerships between retail pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies in the area of marketing require careful management to ensure that they are ethical, fair and beneficial to all parties involved [66]. Pharmacists must put the welfare of their patients first and maintain their professional integrity while promoting and selling pharmaceutical company products. In the pharmaceutical industry, it is important to develop a strong brand identity and promote awareness. Overall, they should consider a mix of marketing channels to effectively promote their products and services to different audiences.

The findings from these studies combined with the results of this research show that pharmacy retailers in various countries use a mix of marketing channels to promote their products and services. In Germany, it is not yet as present for both owners and employees. In the majority of retail pharmacies, customers have the choice between conservative structures and online offers. Our own survey results show that customers buy more frequently from online pharmacies than retail pharmacies expected.

Academic literature shows that the selection and management of media channels are important components of a successful marketing strategy. For example, a study by Kaplan and Haenlein [67] found that social media channels effectively build customer relationships and promote brand loyalty. Similarly, a study by Shifuddin[68] (2022) found that email marketing effectively increases customer engagement and sales. Approximately 66% of respondents rated their success in using media channels as high or very high. This indicates that most of the retail pharmacies surveyed are achieving

their marketing goals through their chosen media channels. Furthermore, the high success rate indicates that they select and utilise their media channels in a targeted and strategic manner.

The effective use of media channels requires a thorough understanding of the target audience and the channels they are most likely to use. This includes traditional and digital media channels such as television, print media, social media and email marketing. Successful implementation of media channel strategies can increase brand awareness, customer loyalty and sales. For retail pharmacies that focus on their local position and customers in the present, blocking MCM can be a high risk [34]. Frick and Schäfer [62] see the pharmacy 2030 concept as a multi-channel system consisting of both physical and online retail. Previous weak implementations are based on a lack of awareness and knowledge.

In addition, studies have shown that consumers in different regions have different cultural backgrounds, values and beliefs, which can influence their purchasing behaviour and preferences. Therefore, pharmaceutical companies need to tailor their marketing efforts to specific regions to ensure maximum effectiveness. In a study by Hornikx et al. [69] (2023), it was found that cultural differences can influence the effectiveness of advertising messages, emphasising the importance of cultural sensitivity in marketing. Geographic region is critical to consumer behaviour and purchasing decisions. Cultural, social and economic factors can vary greatly from region to region, and companies need to understand these factors in order to develop effective marketing strategies. By developing targeted marketing strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of the target audience, organisations can improve their marketing effectiveness, expand their reach and ultimately increase their sales. For example, a study conducted by Hall et al. [70] (2018) found that consumers in different regions of the United States have different preferences for advertising approaches. Consumers in the South tend to respond positively to emotional appeals, while consumers in the West favour informational appeals.

This highlights the need for companies to tailor their marketing strategies to the specific preferences and behaviours of the target audience in each region [71] (Tittelbach, 2014). In addition, understanding the cultural and social norms of a region can be critical to developing effective marketing strategies. A company targeting a region where community and family values are strongly emphasised may need to adapt its marketing messages to reflect these values. This could include highlighting families or groups of people in advertising or emphasising how their products or services can bring people together. In addition, economic factors such as income levels and purchasing habits may differ from region to region. Companies need to be aware of these factors in order to determine pricing strategies, promotional activities and the types of products or services that are most attractive to their target audience. For example, luxury products or services may be more successful in regions where consumers have a higher disposable income, while affordability may be an important factor in purchasing decisions in regions with lower income levels.

In order to tailor marketing strategies to specific age groups,

it is important to understand their purchasing power, specific health needs and preferred communication channels. By targeting different age groups in different ways, organisations can improve their overall marketing effectiveness and ultimately increase sales and customer loyalty. However, this approach may require additional resources and expertise, such as creating targeted content for each demographic and effectively measuring the success of each strategy. According to Bill [61], retail pharmacies are still heavily outgunned by online providers in this regard, which can also be attributed to the difference in marketing investment. While the large mail-order pharmacies in particular invest millions in their online marketing, this area in particular is still barely tapped into by pharmacies [61].

When looking at other countries, there are differences in the adoption and implementation of digital public health solutions, but also similarities when it comes to the situation of retail pharmacies. Dhanraj and Lavanya [72] analysed the pharmacy market in India in terms of distribution via multi-channel systems. There are only a few large pharmacy chains in the country, which cover 90% of the market. They found that Indian customers are increasingly focussing on multiple ways of purchasing goods and are also increasingly using online solutions. As in other countries, the pandemic has triggered a major rethink here. In their study, the two forums analysed how people are affected by medicines without being affected by them and how they are affected by them in the long term. It was found that the planned behaviour extends across all sales channels and that existing retail pharmacies, which are increasingly following this behaviour with digital solutions and marketing, are strengthening their market position. The researchers go further in their assumption.

“Community pharmacies are now approaching a customer-centric system by pursuing omnichannel advertising and omnichannel marketing in pharmacy through digital presence. By developing an omnichannel marketing strategy, community pharmacies are sure to dominate the digital presence.” [72]

This trend towards more and more MCMs in the pharmaceutical market in general in India is also confirmed by Ghosh [73].

“The pharmaceutical industry met the global pandemic in the post-COVID-19 era with changes in their marketing strategies, including advanced marketing, digital marketing, etc., to promote their products and provide value propositions to their HCP customers to accelerate prescriptions from targeted HCPs. During this time, digital marketing has become prevalent and pharma companies are utilising virtual platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, etc. to create and deliver market value.” [73].

From the perspective of the pharmacy industry, research can help to identify and implement effective multi-channel marketing strategies that can improve customer retention, satisfaction and loyalty. The assumption here is that marketing and other business management approaches are not part of the core competences of pharmacies. When it comes to expanding digital opportunities in particular, many industry players are poorly positioned or not positioned at all, both in terms of knowledge and existing implementation.

SUMMARY

To summarise, the healthcare system in Germany is facing numerous challenges, including a shortage of doctors, nurses and retail pharmacies. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about some digital solutions and offerings in the healthcare sector, a real breakthrough in equal digitalisation has yet to be achieved.

The aim of this scientific study was to analyse possible opportunities for repositioning retail pharmacies in the market through a customised multi-channel marketing (MCM) strategy that is aligned with the company's orientation in the market. The study analysed the pharmacy market, identified MCM strategy options and compared the expectations and implementations of the customer and pharmacy side with regard to the MCM strategy as part of a separate survey on a quantitative basis.

It was found that the regional reference and the creation of brand awareness on the part of pharmaceutical suppliers are important factors in the marketing concept of retail pharmacies. Furthermore, it was emphasised that there are no significant differences in the marketing strategies of the various generations. The trend is that marketing is already important today and contributes in many ways to the functioning of a retail pharmacy, but that differences are emerging in the sector which show that only some retail pharmacies are independently breaking new ground.

The majority of retail pharmacies do not use or plan to use different marketing strategies for different regions. This suggests that many of these pharmacies are keeping their marketing efforts too generalised and less focused on regional specifics. The significance of these findings lies in the realisation that there are many opportunities for improvement and adaptation. Regional marketing is important to cater to people's individual needs and preferences. It must take into account the different demographics, cultural backgrounds and behavioural patterns that influence consumer behaviour and choices.

The result is that a large proportion of the retail pharmacies surveyed in the sector do not have a strategic approach to their own business. In the theoretical foundations, an approach for this strategic orientation was based on two factors. On the one hand, this was the industry analysis according to Porter and the LCAG scheme for strategic orientation. The following points are important for retail pharmacies to consider in the context of the industry analysis, which is regarded as an essential basis.

- How many direct competitors are there in the city, the region?
- How are they structured (retail pharmacies, branch structure, mail order)?
- Other competitors (drugstores, discounters, health food shops)
- How far away are these competitors from your own catchment area?
- What specialisations do these competitors offer?

A single retail pharmacy in a region also faces competition from drugstores and discounters in the OTC sector. In addition, mail order companies in other municipalities can

also intervene in demand. It is also necessary to consider the existing customer structure. Rural regions with a low population density and a higher average age must be addressed differently in the marketing strategy than an urban region that is densely populated and has a younger population.

In internal competition between retail pharmacies in a region or district, it should be noted that some of these pharmacies have acquired specialisations that they offer in addition to their standard tasks and core competencies. Here it is important to look at what these offerings are, how the offering is structured in terms of professionalisation and which specialisations are still open.

In the Porter analysis, existing supplier relationships are also important for retail pharmacies when implementing marketing strategies. Indirect competitors, drugstores and discounters, are seen by customers as substitutes in the OTC segments of the pharmaceutical sector. The most difficult area to consider in the strategic marketing orientation of retail pharmacies is the supply side of the new market participants as digital pure players. The evaluation of all parameters from the sector analysis provides the starting points for the strategic planning of the marketing concept for retail pharmacies. In the dual orientation of the strategic definition of the implementation of measures, the identification of opportunities and possibilities is mentioned in the first step of the formulation. This step of the industry analysis can be analysed relatively precisely for each retail pharmacy.

One of the biggest problems with investing in change - regardless of the area - is the ability to finance investments. This also relates to the opportunities for new employees. Core competences must be secured with stable staff and new tasks must not cause any disruption. It is therefore important to start planning with all employees and involve them in the implementation. For example, it must be determined what the knowledge base looks like and whether training is necessary if certain marketing channels have an impact on work processes and new steps with digital technology result from this. It must be checked whether certain tools are available to efficiently set up web shops in the digital area and to operate digital communication at a high level. It is also important to consider how software behaves in terms of compatibility, as not every tool or software runs on every system without conflict.

Sustainability is also an important topic for retail pharmacies and concerns two levels of understanding of the term. In public discourse, sustainability is usually used as a measure to improve environmental conditions. However, it can also be understood as safeguarding and continuing existence, which is just as important for pharmacies in terms of a regulated and safe supply of medicines.

Since it seems possible to determine the strategy and the marketing implementation options using the parameters for retail pharmacies, it is necessary to specify them in the form of measures that fall within the specific selection of the pharmacy type (retail pharmacy, branch structures, integrated mail-order pharmacy, local location, customer structure (demographics), core competencies and possible specialisations).

The greatest necessity and the biggest problem for retail pharmacies is the controlling of measures, as these functions

must be included in addition to the core tasks in order to determine the success of measures. Owner-managed companies, which include retail pharmacies, tend to fail due to a lack of sufficient controlling functions. As a rule, it is the owners who have the final say and decide according to their own ideas.

This is particularly necessary in MCM, as several channels are sometimes used independently of each other and it must be determined for all marketing measures whether they are received and accepted by the customer. Key account management tasks are particularly necessary for retail pharmacies, which are struggling with declining customer numbers, as existing customers ensure the current survival of a company. The use of measurement on a numerical basis can be considered advantageous as long as it involves objective analyses. These can be determined both in monetary terms, according to frequency of use and totals, as well as over time. The identifiable marketing indicators for the retail sector can be summarised as follows:

- Effectiveness measurements of measures (both numerical and process-orientated)
 - Profitability of the investment
 - Frequency of use
 - Reviews from customers
 - Ratings by employees
- Turnover and sales comparisons with historical data
- Acquisition of new customers
- Product orientation of customers as an opportunity for the development of category and content management

The options for parameters and possible measures listed here are to be seen as overarching and applicable to all types of pharmacies and can be used for the evaluation of MCM measures, as they generally cover all channels. Within the LCAG scheme, strategy alignment is easy to organise and can be implemented in the desired areas for retail pharmacies without having to rely on the involvement of specialists in the overall process.

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