

A Qualitative Research on the Role of Product Specialists on the Awareness and Preference of Products

Ali KARAMAN

Hasan Kalyoncu University
Institute of Social Sciences
Gaziantep, Turkey

orcid.org/0000-0001-8738-2918
alikaraman09@hotmail.com

Extensive Summary

Introduction

In order to promote the products of the company and to increase the sales, the product specialists visit doctors, dentists and pharmacists who are in the position of the customers of the company within a certain plan and program and transfer the characteristics, advantages and benefits of the products on the basis of scientific evidence. Product experts who are field representatives of pharmaceutical companies are obliged to comply with the legal regulations determined by the Ministry of Health in promotional and marketing activities. These obligations are stated in the "Regulation on the Promotion Activities of Medicinal Products for Human Use". Accordingly, product specialists are prohibited from promoting to persons other than health professionals who are doctors, dentists and pharmacists (TITCK, 2015). Product specialists must use promotional materials and tools prepared by marketing and medical departments of pharmaceutical companies in accordance with legal framework and competition rules while performing promotional and marketing activities.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects of product specialists on product awareness and product preference.

In the research, the interview form method was preferred and the semi-structured interview form was used in order to reach the same kind of systematic and in-depth knowledge about the examined subject (Miles and Huberman, 2015, p.31; Yildirim and Simsek, 2013, pp. 150-151).

Methodology

In the research, interview method which is the most used method in qualitative researches was used. The main purpose of using the qualitative research method in this study is to determine the effects of product experts who are representatives of drug companies on product awareness and preference through an exploratory approach. In

the interview questions such as "what", "why" and "how" are preferred used to reach the qualified data on the research topic and to get detailed idea (Bechhofer and Paterson, 2000, pp. 56-57; Glesne, 2014; Huberman, 2015, p. 34; Yildirim and Simsek, 2013, pp. 317-318).

In this research, purposeful sampling methods which are born and shaped in the qualitative research tradition have been used as samples. (Creswell, 2016, pp. 156-157). In this study, it was examined whether the individuals to be interviewed were directly related to the research rather than their power to represent the universe (Neuman, 2012, p. 320). When it is noticed that the repetitions are frequent in the information obtained from participants about the topic, the negotiations are ended with the thought that the "saturation point" has been reached (Yildirim and Simsek, 2013, pp. 321-322). In this direction, interviews were conducted with a total of nineteen participants, including fifteen specialist physicians in eight different branches (Inside, Cardiology, Ear Nose Throat, Neurology, Psychiatry, Brain and Neurosurgery, Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation, Chest Diseases) and four product specialists in total. Seven of the interviews were carried out manually by the researcher, while twelve were recorded by voice recorder. 100% of participating physicians were visited face-to-face by product specialists. It has been determined that at least one of the digital promotional tools such as iPad, e-conferencing and meeting, email marketing, membership to web sites for physicians, etc. has been used in these visits made by product specialists.

At the end of each interview, a brief summary of the interview was submitted to the participant in order to ensure the credibility and transferability of the survey and the participants were asked to indicate their thoughts on the accuracy of the summary and the participant's confirmation was obtained. Participant confirmation is a method used to ensure the credibility of the research. With a different expression it is important that the interviewer's own perception of the interview is tested to ensure that the data conveyed by the participant is understood correctly (Erlandson et al., 1993).

In order to calculate the consistency ratios of the generated codes, the data of different interviews are coded separately and unaware by an independent person who is expert in the field of qualitative research together with the researcher. Afterwards, the consistency ratios were calculated by comparing the coding made. If the consistency rate between codes is over 80%, the encoding is considered to have a high degree of reliability. In this study, the reliability formula was used to calculate the ratio of code consistency (code match rate); "Reliability = Number of Consensus / Total Consensus + Dissent". In the reliability analysis conducted by using the formula above, the code match rate was found to be 91%. Therefore, the coding in this study is thought to have a high degree of reliability (Miles and Huberman, 2015, p. 64).

In this study, "content analysis" technique proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was preferred in analyzing the data obtained by the interview method and all the data were analyzed by coding and separating into categories (Yildirim and Simsek, 2013, p. 259). First, the raw data from the interviews were read by the investigator repeatedly (Glesne, 2014, p. 256). In the next stage, the codes which constitute the meaning within themselves are brought together to form the categories (Miles and Huberman, 2015, p. 58; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). After the code, subcode, category and subcategories are specified, the coding phase is passed. In order to complete the other analysis processes that guide the findings at this stage, all the code lists and interview data were transferred

to the "MAXQDA12" program, which is a qualitative data analysis program, and analyzed by frequency and percentage distribution analysis (Maxqda, 2017).

Findings

It has been seen from the research data that the product experts who are company representatives have a liaison role between the firm and the physician and they perform active presentation and informing functions about the products they are promoting. For this reason, 23.53% of the participant expressions attribute the influence of product experts to product awareness very high. When the influence of the product expert is generally assessed, the vast majority of the participant expressions are that the product experts have affect on the product awareness. Another noteworthy finding in this research is that the product experts who play an active role in product promotion need to have a good diction.

As regards the influence of the product specialist (PS) on the product preference, it is seen that the expressions evaluating the effect of PS as "very high" have a rate of 25.71%. It has been seen that the rate of evaluating the preference effect of the product specialist as "high" is 17.14%. Another important data here is that the findings of the product experts reveal that there is no improvement in credibility. Physicians have expressed that "the product specialist can not change my mind". It is thought that these statements can be evaluated as data reinforcing the fact that product experts are not increasing the credibility. Other noteworthy findings are that the product specialist is identified with the firm and the product, and that the visit is influential in product preference.

Discussion

When the role of product experts in promotion is examined, it has been reached that the product specialists makes contact between firms and physicians as a bridge and that they actively inform the physicians about the products and therefore the effect of awareness on product is high. Product specialists have been shown to be influential on the positive side of product preference for the effect on product selection, but they have not added any added value to the reliability of promotions. To increase reliability in presentation may be possible with the support of scientific research data for information conveyed in presentations. In the study, it was stated that some product specialists could not persuade the physicians because not using scientific and objective data involved in promotional activities. The lack of credibility leads to the inability of the physician's preferences to be changed in the desired direction. According to the research result made by Tosun and Arslan Kurtulus (2017), it was seen that the characteristics of product specialists were weak in physician prescribing decisions. According to another research, the Sermo questionnaire (2012), 89% of physicians want to communicate their product introductions with clinical investigations and trainings and to include them in their discussions. Based on this research and previous research data, it has come to the conclusion that the introduction of medicinal products must be based on scientific evidence and clinic data.

An increase in the frequency of visits made by product specialists has resulted in the identification of the product and the person working the product, which in turn has positively reflect on the preference of the physician. As a result of a study conducted by Sezgin (2017), it was found that 37.2% of the product specialists were the most important factor in placing products in the market. In the same research, it was found

that visiting the physicians regularly is an important factor in keeping the products in the market. In this context, it has been seen that both research data point to similar results.

In conclusion, it can be considered that product specialists increase product awareness by promoting and informing physicians about the products they are responsible for but they are not effective on convincing the physicians and not able to make significant change on their attitude for product preference.