



Operationalizing the 7Ps Strategy for Aesthetic Clinic Success

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ABSTRACT

Health and beauty are an increasingly popular trend worldwide, as evident from the strong growth of the aesthetic and surgery business. Thailand is one of the key markets in the Asia-Pacific region, with significant growth driven by a 20-year national strategy to promote the country as a medical hub with a strong emphasis on aesthetics and cosmetology, increasing its competitive advantage. Previous research has focused on the influence of the service marketing mix on purchase decisions; however, research is still lacking on how to operationalize these strategies. The objective of this article is to (1) determine the significant factors of marketing mixes used to recruit and retain customers and (2) recommend key tactics to operationalize marketing strategies. Product strategies should focus on bundled packages with different tiers and innovation tactics, while price strategy should center around value for money with installment plans and a “Buy More Save More” package. Convenience should be at the center of the place strategy and promotional campaigns should advertise the service providers’ qualifications as well as using the tactics of customer relationship management and celebrity endorsements. People strategy focuses on manpower planning, qualified staff recruitment as well as training and development. Process strategy involves minimizing waiting time while maximizing quality service operation level. Physical evidence creates the pleasant ambiance and professional image to support other marketing mix.

1. INTRODUCTION

Health and beauty are an increasingly popular trend worldwide. The aesthetic and cosmetic surgery sector is forecasted to reach a market size of 39,842.8 million US dollars in 2025, up from 23,715.6 million US dollars in 2017 [1], [27] In Thailand, aesthetic clinics and surgery businesses have shown continuous market growth averaging 7.4% per year, driven by the 20-year national strategy to increase Thailand’s competitive advantage by promoting the country as a medical hub with a strong emphasis on aesthetics and cosmetology for both local and tourists [2] One of the conditions fueling the rapid expansion of the aesthetic industry is the growing number of female working adults, aged 20–35, who believe that appearance is important to having better opportunities and becoming successful in the workplace [3, 4], as well as an emerging market of male consumers who have started to take greater care of their appearance to enhance their image in the workplace and society [5]. These male consumers tend to use whitening skin care, hair coloring, face powder, and lipstick as part of their grooming regime [6].

There is a long-existing beauty standard among Thai consumers that has been emphasized by television series,

advertising, and social media and promotes the ideal look as being one of fair skin, big round eyes, a prominent nose, chestnut-shaped lips, bright skin, smooth armpits, and slender legs [7] This generalized beauty standard suggested to the younger Thai generation that a pleasant appearance and personality could lead to success in work and life [8]. This Eurocentric beauty standard—attributed to European colonization in the 15th century—is common across Central and South Asia and is seen in television commercials, drama series, beauty queen competitions, and the content of online influencers [9] Aesthetic clinics have obtained increasing acceptance among younger generations who choose to visit aesthetic clinics to improve their physical appearance and personality.

The geographic expansion of aesthetic clinics has gone beyond Bangkok to the key cities in each region such as Chonburi, Chiangmai, Khon Kaen, Phuket, and Songkla, due to an increasingly affordable price point for people living in the urban, upcountry areas [10]; [4] Fast expansion has happened among chain aesthetic clinics that have strong brand awareness and recognition. Clinics such as Nitipon (127 branches) and Pornkasem (33 branches) have taken advantage of the opportunity to expand their customer base

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into other provinces. However, some chains have attempted to expand too quickly and have had to close some branches due to a lack of success. The aesthetic clinic market in Thailand has strong growth potential due to both locals and tourists who view beauty treatments in the newly established medical as a good value. The sector is expected to continue to grow and can serve as a new pillar, driving sustainable business growth in Thailand [11]. The impressive growth aesthetic clinic in Thailand at 8-10% year on year is driven by service marketing mix that make this business grow amidst the overall economic recession. [26].

Even though aesthetic clinic is one of the rising stars, there are 2 main challenges; (1) how to create long-term sustainable growth for the business with the right marketing strategies and (2) how to pre-empt new competitors to enter the market with the loss leader copycats intending to steal customers and market share [11]. This therefore demands a well-defined marketing mix strategy that needs to be executed appropriately.

Prior studies mainly focused on the effect of the marketing mix used by aesthetic clinics on customer purchase and repurchase intentions [3], [12, 13]. The main challenge of the aesthetic clinic business is to create and execute 7Ps strategy to drive competitive advantage and long-term sustainable growth. Hence, there is a research gap in prioritizing and operationalizing the optimum service marketing mix in the very competitive aesthetic market.

Academic Article Objectives

The objective of this article is to (1) uncover and prioritize the significant factors of marketing mixes to recruit and retain customers and (2) propose key tactics to operationalize marketing strategies.

Academic Article Methodology

This article is derived from an extensive review of business statistics as well as recent research articles related to aesthetic business of total 25 sources to present important aspects of service marketing mix related to aesthetic clinic business.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Service Definition and Characteristics

Services are economic activities performed by a service provider that deliver value to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer. The customer derives the value of the service from the skill of the provider, the facilities, physical evidence, and the service process and efficiency [14]. Service-based businesses differ from goods-based businesses in four main ways: intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability [15].

Service intangibility means that the customer cannot see, taste, feel, hear, or smell the service before they receive it. A customer who decides to purchase a treatment from an

aesthetic clinic cannot see the results or fully calculate the risks before making the purchase decision. The customer can only estimate the quality of the service from signals given by the service venue, staff, price, and equipment. Because of this intangibility factor, the marketing executive or entrepreneur should focus on a pleasant physical location and professional service personnel.

By their nature, services cannot be separated from the service provider, whether the provider is human or machine. This phenomenon is called service inseparability. Service staff are regarded as part of the service, as is the customer. The service can only happen when there is an interaction between the provider and the customer, so a positive service experience occurs when a service provider is skillful and both the provider and the customer cooperate in the service. In the case of an aesthetic clinic, the provider must correctly understand or diagnose the needs and wants of the customer before recommending or prescribing the right treatment. During this process, the customer must communicate their problems and requirements to the service provider, dermatologist, or nurse. The service provider must establish trust from the first encounter with the customer to gain business.

Service variability refers to the fact that the service quality is dependent upon the service provider, time, location, and service methods. Aesthetic clinics involve high levels of engagement with the customer and the utilization of various equipment needed for treatments. If the staff is not skillful enough to operate the equipment to suit the customer's needs, the results may not be satisfactory. The service provider must also possess a customer-service mindset when preparing the customer for the treatment. This is especially important for first-time customers who may be excited or worried about the treatment experiences and results.

Services are perishable in that they cannot be stocked or stored for the next purchase. Because an aesthetic clinic hires dermatologists or nurses for a full day, it must pay the full daily wage to the service provider, even when if customers only receive services during some parts of the day. The service staff's idle time cannot be retained or used to perform services at a later time. Furthermore, utilities such as air conditioning and lights must also be on during operating hours, regardless of whether customers are present. An aesthetic clinic entrepreneur must use a service marketing mix strategy to overcome the natural characteristics of service businesses.

2.2 Service Marketing Mix

The service marketing mix is a core strategy that uses the basic marketing mix with additional factors that correspond with service businesses. The components of the service marketing mix are collectively referred to as the 7Ps: product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence [14].

(1) Products are the heart of service marketing. If a product does not create value in the eyes of the customer, it is unlikely to be successful, even if the other components of the service marketing mix are well executed. The product model consists of core products, meant to satisfy the basic needs of the customer, supported by supplementary services and delivery processes. The flower of service model, as shown in Figure 1, is being used to represent the different product aspects of a service.



Fig. 1. Flower of Service Model [14].

(2) Price refers to the service fee that is exchanged for the service. This is the only component of the marketing mix through which the entrepreneur receives business revenue. The pricing strategy should be dynamic so that it can be adjusted according to factors such as target group, duration of service, location, level of demand, and service capacity. The customer will evaluate whether the service is worth it based on the money, effort, and time spent to receive the service. The marketing executive or entrepreneur should not only try to price the service so that the customer is willing to pay the fee, but also reduce indirect costs incurred by the customer such as idle waiting time, transportation hassles, and parking fees. These hassles can result in customers' frustration.

(3) Place includes both location and time, as service distribution can occur through physical or electronic channels or as a combination of the two. Most aesthetic clinics will use the clinic venue as well as social media platforms such as Line, Facebook, Instagram, or Tiktok as the channels of service product distribution. Customers tend to search for product information and make inquiries through social media to gain an understanding of the product or receive consultations about aesthetic treatments before making a reservation. Some may even conduct video calls with dermatologists or nurses to consult about their problems or expectations before visiting the physical location.

(4) Promotion refers to the activities that inform, persuade, and remind the customer to purchase a service product. Promotion initially starts with informing and educating the customer about the service's features, benefits, location, and operating hours. Because services and their components can be difficult for customers to imagine or understand, customers may hesitate to make a decision. Successful promotion must establish confidence, trustworthiness, and professionalism. Most aesthetic clinics feature the qualifications and experiences of service providers, including national and international industry standard certifications and awards.

(5) People refers to the influence the service provider has on the service results whether or not they have direct interaction with the customer. Even with advancements in technology, some services still require direct interaction with the customer. Through contact with the provider, the customer is able to perceive the staff's attitude and level of skill. An aesthetic clinic entrepreneur must place a strong emphasis on recruiting, training, and motivating service providers. In addition to service skills, the service staff should have strong communication skills, as well as positive attitudes and a service mindset.

(6) Process refers to the steps required to deliver the service to the customer. Service processes should be designed to avoid service delays, inefficiency, and errors. When more than one branch or location exists for face-to-face services, it can be difficult to create consistency, as the service may vary between branches. Some service products require information or involvement from the customer before a service can be delivered. Aesthetic clinics provide these types of services since the customer is actively involved in the process of customizing their service. If a process does not successfully involve the customer, the service result may not be satisfactory. In situations where there may be high demand for certain schedules or appointment times, there should be a process to manage the queue and minimize the waiting time of the customer.

(7) Physical evidence means the characteristics of the service location or venue, including the architecture of the building, landscape, interior design, service equipment, service staff uniform, and signage. Each element of the service environment should clearly communicate the service quality and the design of the service venue should facilitate the whole process of service delivery, resulting in customer satisfaction.

3. 7 Ps STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR SUCCESS

3.1 Product Strategy

Product strategy is regarded as one of the most important elements of the service marketing mix since the product is what is intended to fulfill the needs and wants of the customer [16]. Product strategy influences customer loyalty [14]. The product strategy of aesthetic clinics involves the

core product or treatment—such as equipment-based, skin booster injections—as well as supplementary services and delivery processes by the service provider. An aesthetic clinic's product strategy should be designed based on the customer's evolving needs, as well as the latest technologies that can deliver state-of-the-art results. Design of the product portfolio should begin by studying the beauty trends and standards in each market, particularly that of the target consumer. Supporting services also include information, consultation, order taking, hospitality, safekeeping, exceptions, billing, and payment as per the flower of service model (Figure 1).

Customers of aesthetic clinics may be seeking services in several categories including skin quality improvement, firming and tightening, and atrophic scar treatment, so a bundling or regime product strategy should be employed to develop a service package/menu with complementary treatments to promote better results. For example, firming and tightening treatments utilizing Ulthera, Thermage, botulinum toxin, and hyaluronic acid may help establish a customer's trust in the aesthetic clinic as a beauty enhancement expert. Treatments should be supported with transparent information on expected results and side effects or downtime and consultations with experts who are ready to welcome the customer and facilitate the reservation should be provided. Product strategy is closely linked with the people, process, and promotion strategies. Product tactics can include different tiers of the product menu or package according to the customer's conditions and affordability. Those who have more serious skin conditions and are more affluent would be willing to subscribe to a larger package with a higher frequency of intensive treatment. Packages can be designed in three tiers and designated as silver, gold, and platinum to signal the level of service. Innovations in treatments can support the product strategy since they can enhance the clinic's competitive advantage of the clinic [18]. These innovations may also alleviate price sensitivity as customers will place a higher value on the results and will not directly compare price differentials among clinics. Quickly adopting new, state-of-the-art treatments or devices can help beauty clinics cope with evolving customer needs, address emerging skin problems, and improve overall treatment results [19]. One caution is that it is important to clearly communicate expected outcomes to the customer to finetune expectations, as some treatments make take time to see results.

3.2 Price Strategy

The pricing strategy should be determined based on the value perception of the product; the customer should not feel that the price is too expensive or too cheap. Given the availability of pricing information in both offline and online touchpoints, customers can easily check and compare price information. Price has a direct relationship with the decision of whether or not to purchase a service at an aesthetic clinic

[20]. Service fees at aesthetic clinics are relatively high and may not be affordable to some customers. Implementing an installment plan to alleviate the burden of high up-front costs can overcome perceptions of unaffordability. If a treatment requires higher frequency, aesthetic clinics can offer an "all-you-can-treat" or "buffet" package, which customers may perceive as more economical. Clinics can also promote treatment combo purchases through a "Buy More Save More" promotion. The clinic can increase the ticket size, while the customer saves money as compared to buying separate treatments.

3.3 Place Strategy

The place strategy directly affects customer loyalty [17]. Aesthetic clinics should adopt a place strategy that focuses on a location that is easy to access using various means of transportation [21], a clean and spacious venue, and providing online service reservation and package purchase. The interior design of the clinic should reflect a trustworthy and comforting ambiance so that the customer feels relaxed and ready for their treatment. A comforting waiting area, free beverages and snacks, a pleasant and relaxing aroma, and a welcoming service counter design can all be used to create a memorable experience for the customer and thus increase customer loyalty.

3.4 Promotion Strategy

Promotion strategy is closely linked to customer decision-making [16]; [17]. The promotion strategy is used to provide the customer with product and pricing information and inform them how they can contact the clinic. Aesthetic clinics should use their promotion strategy to introduce the clinic's service providers to build credibility and trustworthiness. Customers like to know the qualifications of the service provider, especially doctors and dermatologists, in order to know that they have enough experience to deliver the service. Integrated marketing communication can effectively predict purchase intention at aesthetic clinics by a rate of 65.3% [3]. Social media, especially Facebook, Instagram, and Line, is widely used by aesthetic clinics due to its popularity among Thai consumers. We are social report by [22] reveals that Thai people spent an average of 8 hours and 6 minutes on the internet per day, most of which is spent watching TV (broadcast and streaming), followed by using social media. Consumers perceive social media as a reliable source in their decision-making process.

(1) Customers recognize their skin or aging problems from the advertising identifying common skin and beauty problems.

(2) Once a problem is identified, they start searching for information on the aesthetic clinic regarding types of services/treatments, locations, credentials of doctors and therapists, sales promotions, and testimonials and reviews from other customers.

(3) Customers can compare and contrast prices and service quality by sending direct messages via social media to inquire for further details,

(4) They gather various sources of information and make a final decision to book a first appointment.

(5) After experiencing the first service, customers tend to post reviews on their own social media or the clinic's social media to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction [13].

Side-by-side comparisons showing the improvement after the treatment as well as reviews of experiences at the clinic from celebrities or influencers are key promotion tactics. The use of celebrities has been found to influence purchase decisions. Once a clinic has expanded its customer base, relationship management tactics should be put in place to retain customers and gain customer loyalty, which can be evident through repurchase rate, positive word of mouth or referral, and favorable brand image, improving overall clinic performance [23], [4].

3.5 People Strategy

Customer satisfaction is directly linked to the people strategy [24, 25]. Clinic staff, including specialized doctors, experienced therapists, and other service staff, should have the required skills to successfully perform the service; consumers tend to have high expectations for cosmetology services given the high risk of unfavorable results. Most beauty clinics are owned by a doctor who may or may not have previous organization management experience, so structuring the team, assigning responsibilities, and promoting collaboration can be a challenge. A successful people strategy will promote service-minded behaviors, responsiveness, and problem-solving skills to make customers feel comfortable and help provide the correct remedy at the right point in time.

3.6 Process Strategy

The process strategy involves many steps from the first customer contact to the completed service delivery and has a large impact on the success or failure of an aesthetic clinic [24]. When customers are not satisfied with the service, it is often a result of the service process, such as a long wait time or lack of an appropriate sequence of arrangement. There should be a service blueprint for every process to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Establishing service and quality standards that comply with regulations and exceed customer expectations is key to a successful process strategy. Managing waiting time is an important tactic for aesthetic clinics since customers do not like to wait for a long time. Making appointments prior to treatment can help reduce the waiting time and optimize the changeover interval between customers since some treatments will require preparation such as cleaning the skin and applying anesthetic paste, which can take 15–20 minutes.

3.7 Physical Evidence Strategy

The physical evidence strategy supports the product delivery, people, place and promotion to provide the customer with the right ambiance, utilize effective equipment, and become the touchpoint of communication. All aspects of physical evidence including furniture, decoration, color tone, and aroma should be designed according to the brand image of the clinic with the intent of consistently delivering a pleasant experience. Successful physical evidence strategy lies in the feeling of exclusivity, though customers may not want to be seen in the clinic. The clinic should be welcoming from the outside but people outside should not be able to see the people inside to promote the privacy and security of the customer. Influential people or celebrities may not want people to know when and where they go for beauty treatments.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The service marketing mix (7Ps) is the key strategic direction that determines the success or failure of an aesthetic clinic; however, there is still a lack of operationalized tactics that turn strategy into reality. Product strategy can be focused on a bundled package or menu with different tiers and innovation tactics based on problems and behavioral criteria. Price strategy should be set based on the market price and can use tactics such as installment plans and “Buy More Save More” to overcome perceptions of unaffordability. A sample tactic combined product and price targeting anti-aging benefits is to create a wrinkle free package that combines the treatment of Ultherapy, Thermage laser with Botulinum toxin injection with saving of 25%. A focus on convenience in both offline and online locations and superior services is key for place strategy. Promoting the qualifications of the service providers and using celebrity endorsement and customer relationship management tactics can enhance the promotion strategy. The combination of place and promotion tactic can be the omni channel of aesthetic clinic that includes physical clinic, social media as well as presence as the shop in shop in popular e-commerce platform such as Lazada and Shopee, enhancing exposures and creating seamless experiences to search for information or pre-purchase the service. People strategy should involve careful planning of capacity and manpower to have staff with the correct level of training and mindsets that focus on responsiveness and problem-solving tactics. Process strategy should be well developed in a service blueprint to minimize the waiting time as much as possible. Physical evidence strategy creates the overall atmosphere of the aesthetic clinic and must be consistent with other elements of the service marketing mix. Balancing a welcoming appearance with an exclusive ambiance that protects the privacy and security of the customer is the recommended approach. People, process, and physical evidence are directly related to create a tactic that service staff can delivery one-stop service from greetings, provide treatments, and increase weight of purchase though

recommending budding package. [28] This can be achieved through the detailed service process from taking the customer to the pleasant and cozy waiting area and serve them with the welcome drink, then present the service menu and state of the art treatment devices with recommendations for the right treatment. After the service is delivered, the staff promptly inquires customers 'satisfaction and prepare the next appointment. Follow-up phone calls to customers on the next day demonstrates caring and attentive. The 7Ps service marketing mix and tactics should be properly designed to support each element; however, it is most important is to determine the target market and product before designing other elements of the service marketing mix (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Recommended flow of service marketing mix design for aesthetic clinics.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Owners of aesthetic clinics should utilize the 7Ps strategy and tactics of product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence. The product strategy should be clearly defined to match the target consumer before moving to other elements of the marketing mix. An owner of a newly established working with a team to go live in the marketplace.

2. The marketing executive should implement key tactics to turn the strategies into action. For example, a product-bundling or package strategy can be divided into tiers to meet the needs of more customers need since one tier may not be appropriate for all. Innovation is also crucial to create a sense newness and a favorable image as the market leader as consumers are often well informed about new technologies through the Internet.

Further Research Opportunities

Aesthetic clinics in Thailand fall under several different business stages from the newly set up to the long established. There is an opportunity to compare and contrast the strategies used by different clinics to determine the key factors necessary to become successful at each stage. The outcome of this research can help aesthetic businesses understand how to create sustainable growth.

Furthermore, there should be a research study to uncover the reasons for failure cases in this industry whether it involves 7Ps or any other factors to provide recommendations to turnaround unsuccessful business or avoid some foreseen obstacles.

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