

## FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMAGE OF HOSPITALS – LITERATURE ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** In the article, we present the literature research results regarding factors responsible for the image we hold of enterprises such as hospitals in Poland. A major part of such held image is that of the organization as an employer. Hence, in this paper, we identify the factors influencing the perception of hospitals within the labour market. Herein, identification of requirements is the first stage of a three-stage study devoted to image creation.

**Keywords:** hospital, healthcare, corporate image, employer branding.

### 1. Introduction

As a result of a reform that took place in 2011, by law, most hospitals in Poland conduct their activities as a commercial company, albeit with public capital. After the commercialization process, these entities could obtain financing by the National Health Fund (pol. Narodowy Fundusz Zdrowia) and/or by their own commercial activities. This reform of the hospital system (e.g. a departure from hospitals being perceived as Independent Public Health Care Facilities) resulted in the entry of public hospitals onto the commercial market, and thus it was to stimulate competitiveness between these entities, including, ideally, an increase in the quality of services offered.

However, according to the research results conducted in 2018 by the Public Opinion Research Center, two-thirds of nearly 1,000 respondents negatively assess the functioning of the healthcare system in Poland. Respondents, above all, drew special attention to the insufficient availability of visits to specialists and the unsatisfactory number of medical staff in hospitals. Also noteworthy are the studies published by the European Commission in 2016. According to the report "Health at a Glance Europe", Poles have limited confidence in doctors – a negative rating was given by 62% of all respondents.

One of the tools that can improve public opinion about the healthcare system is effective management of the held image of hospitals – which are the main pillar of the healthcare sector. This image can refer to both the brand, i.e. the image of the hospital as an entity providing high quality services, and the image of the hospital as an employer (employer branding). The need to create a positive reception of medical entities does not result solely from the marketisation of the healthcare sector (including the growing number of private facilities). It is also a result of the increase in access to mass media, which is reflected in the increase of patients' awareness and the growing expectations of health services and provided medical services (Syrkiewicz-Świtała, et al., 2014, p. 118).

Hospitals can use image as a tool to communicate with future patients and influence patient's choices regarding planned treatment (e.g. regarding commercially/economic available treatments for instance connected with medical tourism). Patient satisfaction, understood as their perception of the quality of provided health services, is also related to the image of the hospital (among others, research conducted by Assila, et al., 2019, p. 914; Indrianawati, 2017, p. 25; Taranko, 2016, p. 66). Numerous scientific studies confirm the fact that the probability of recommending a particular hospital in the case of deterioration of health or life threat increases with the patient's satisfaction from their stay in a given facility (Rosiek, & Leskowski, 2012, p. 7).

Undoubtedly, hospital staff has a great impact on the quality of provided health services. Creating a positive image of the employer may contribute to acquiring better qualified staff in the future, followed by more patients, both public and private, and to increasing the loyalty of current hospital employees (Robak, 2016, p. 83). As the results of research conducted by the European Commission in 2016 show, Poland has the lowest number of doctors (about 2 people) per 1000 inhabitants. Acquiring qualified staff, and then keeping them in the organization, seems to be a key factor for conducting current operations and for effective contracting and image creation. The dual functioning purpose of hospitals (to cure and earn) facilitates an increase in the importance of information, identity and image management and introduces the concept of healthcare e-marketing to the Polish hospital market, with the end goal of increasing working capital.

Considering the above, the main purpose of the article is to identify factors affecting the corporate aspect and to indicate factors responsible for bulding the hospital image. Based on the literature analysis, attempts were made to answer two basic questions, i.e. what factors affect the corporate image and does the hospital image depend on the same factors as the image of other enterprises? The results of the analysis presented in the article constitute the first stage of research on image creation by hospitals in Poland.

## 2. Corporate image

In the source literature, the image of the organization is placed in one of two areas, i.e. in the area of public relations (PR), which is part of the promotion (Orfin-Tomaszewska, et al., 2019, p. 264), or in the area of management as one of its functions (Dolińska-Weryńska, 2016, p. 30). Public relations in marketing is defined as the way a company communicates with its environment. The purpose of activities undertaken within it, such as, e.g. building reputation or credibility, is to promote and protect the image of the organization or its products (Dolińska-Weryńska, 2016, p. 28). In turn, in PR management, it refers to establishing and maintaining mutual, beneficial relations between the organization and its audience (Biesaga-Słomczewska, et al., 2017, p. 44), in a different way to that between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders.

There are many definitions of the concept of image in the subject literature. Among others, image can be defined as "the public face" of the organization (usually developed by specialists in this field), which presents it in a favorable light and serves to gain social acceptance for its activities (...)" (Rzewuska, et al., 2013, p. 6). On the other hand, according to H. Mruk, image is a sum of ideas, feelings and convictions arising as a result of received signals. Other researchers believe that the image is a held holistic perception about the organization, which is created in the minds of entities belonging to the organization's environment (Witczak, 2013, p. 83). The image of an organization providing health services is recognized as a set of information that makes patients recognize and distinguish this organization from another (Syrkiewicz-Świtała, et al., 2014, p. 118). According to A. Stachowicz-Stanusch, the image of the company in the eyes of the client is created by sales representatives, and, in turn, translates into the reality of hospitals. This implies that the image of the hospital is created primarily by first contact staff working in the emergency room or in the hospital emergency department (ER).

The main tool used to create the image is marketing communication. This aims to evoke a positive reception of the organization among entities from its environment. Integrated marketing communication focuses on communication and building relationships with the organization's stakeholders (Tarczydło, 2014, p. 239). The company's image also includes its brand and image created in a virtual space, such as the appearance (graphic design, transparency, responsiveness) of its website, the way information is presented, or the possibility of contact using e-communication channels (Pieczarka, p. 166) and mobile communication such as text or mms (Tarczydło, 2014, p. 240). In turn, the company's brand – name, graphic symbol, symbol, acronym (Tyliszczak, 2016, p. 10) allows, among other outcomes, distinguishing one organization from another on the market. Moreover, it affects the company's credibility and customer confidence (Witczak, 2013, p. 85).

Based on the conducted literature research, factors affecting the image of enterprises were identified and presented together with the division into individual areas (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Factors affecting the overall image of hospitals*

Area	Factors affecting the image of hospitals
Information activities	Hospital helpline
	Hospital magazine / bulletin
	Organization of "open days" by the hospital
	Organization of conferences and seminars by the hospital aimed at patients
	Implementation / involvement in preventive actions
	Hospital TV
Hospital infrastructure	Cooperation with local and national media
	Additional services inside the building (e.g. photocopier, post office, shop, cafe, ATM)
	Aesthetics of rooms including sanitary rooms
	Hospital parking
	Facilities to increase the comfort of hospital stay, e.g. TV in the room
	Sanitary unit in patient rooms
	Exterior view of the building
	Equipping the hospital with modern medical equipment and apparatus
Quality of provided services	Amenities / decor including patient rooms and staff rooms
	Certificates confirming qualifications of medical staff
	Certificates confirming compliance with ISO standards
	Direct contact with medical staff
	Patients thanks
	Attitude and behavior of the first contact staff
	Position in the national hospital rankings e.g. safe hospital, best hospital, etc.
	Cooperation with other medical centers in Poland
	Cooperation with other foreign medical centers
	The appearance of employees, e.g. a badge with the position, clean overall with the name of the hospital
Internet communication (e-communication)	Behavior of hospital medical staff
	The scope of provided health services, e.g. a multi-specialized hospital
	Journalistic articles about the hospitals
	Current update of information on the website
	Website readability and transparency
	Hospital grading on the internet (e.g. based on Google reviews)
Other people's opinions	Opinions about the hospital placed on websites (e.g. thematic, related to the city, etc.) and on social media
	The positioning (place) of the hospital's website in the search engine
	Website design adapted to the needs of the disabled, modern trends and technologies
	Use of hospital health services by public / known persons (e.g. politicians, actors)
	Hospital opinion forwarded by the referring physician to the hospital
Visual markings	Opinion about the hospital given by public / known persons
	Opinion about the hospital given by family / friends
	Hospital reputation
	The acronym of the first letters of the hospital name
	Hospital logo
	Hospital name
Visual markings	Signs outside the hospital, e.g. directional boards
	Markings inside the hospital, e.g. information boards and list of wards

Note. Adapted from: "Czynniki kształtujące wizerunek Alior Banku S.A." by A. Galicka, A. Tomaszuk. 2018; "Rola influencerów w kształtowaniu wizerunku firmy na przykładzie Airbnb" by Kowalska. 2019; "Instrumenty marketingu-mix w kształtowaniu wizerunku obiektu hotelarskiego. Rozważania teoretycznoanalityczne" K. Orfin-Tomaszewska et. al. 2019; "Kształtowanie wizerunku placówek ochrony zdrowia na rynku usług medycznych" by E. Kemicer-Chmielewska et al. 2010; "Strategia komunikacji marketingowej 360 stopni w kreowaniu wizerunku marki usługi. Studium przypadku" by B. Tarczydło. 2014; "Budowanie wizerunku gabinetów stomatologicznych za pośrednictwem narzędzi public relations" by M. Syrkiewicz-Światała. 2014; "Ocena jakości usługi systemowej na przykładzie leczenia szpitalnego" by T. Taranko. 2016; "Infrastruktura szpitala, a satysfakcja pacjenta (...)" by Rosiek A., Leksowski K. (2012); "Satysfakcja z opieki medycznej w oddziałach zachowawczych SPZOZ (...)" by Kos M. et al. (2016)

Due to the applicable legal provisions (e.g. the Act of 15 April 2011 on medical activities, Resolution No. 29/11/VI of the Supreme Medical Council of 16 December 2011, or the Medical Code of Ethics), hospitals cannot operate with features of advertising. The legislator in art. 14, paragraph 1 of the Act on Medical Activity imposed on healthcare entities the obligation to publicly inform about the scope and type of health services provided, however, it excluded the possibility of encouraging the use of specific health services or promoting them. The Act does not preclude the possibility of directing marketing activities individually to a specific person and advertising other services (health concerned), excluding funeral services – art. 13, item 1 of Medical Activity Act. In the Act on radio and television, there is also a provision forbidding "broadcasting of commercial services for health services". Pursuant to the Act, advertising health services is punishable by detention, restriction of liberty or the imposition of a fine. It is worth emphasizing that although advertising of health services is prohibited, the legislator does not exclude the implementation of marketing activities in the field of prevention, health promotion, research activities (e.g. information about the possibility of participating in ongoing clinical trials). Due to the above, advertising placed in the press, television, cinema, radio and the Internet, as well as other forms of marketing communication bearing traces of advertising, e.g. leaflets, were excluded from the list of factors affecting the image of hospitals. Also, due to the financial difficulties that hospitals face most often, and due to the specificity of their operations, sponsorship, promotional competitions, exhibitions, sponsored shows, sales promotions, email marketing, etc. were excluded from the list.

A total of 43 factors influencing the image of hospitals were identified, which were arranged alphabetically and assigned to six areas, i.e. the area of information activities in which activities directed outside and inside the hospital were distinguished, followed by the area of hospital infrastructure, quality of provided services, and internet communication (e-communication), opinions of other people, and hospital visual markings.

### **3. Employer branding**

One of the main tasks of public relations is building relationships and attention to effective communication. External PR activities focus on the environment of the organization and are used to build the image and appropriate reputation. However, it should be remembered that PR also focuses on internal activities by building positive relations between the employee (current but also future) and the employer, e.g. strengthening employee loyalty (Biesaga-Słomczeska, 2017, p. 45). Due to the fact that the image of the employer affects the overall image of the enterprise, in the present article, we identify the factors responsible for the image of the organization on the labour market. It is worth emphasizing that employer branding is called a tool for building the image of an enterprise (Molenda, 2009, p. 304).

The area of research on employer branding (EB) is not very popular among researchers, as evidenced by the number of papers published in scientific databases. For example, in Polish scientific databases such as BazEkon, since 2005, the number of articles on the subject of employer branding has amounted to 204 papers. In turn, in Baz Tech 34, in the global database (Science Direct) since 2002 (i.e. since the concept appeared), nearly 300 articles related to this area have been published.

The concept of employer branding was shaped in the 1990s or at the beginning of the 21st century, including during a conference organized by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development – 1990 and as a result of work carried out by S. Barrow – 1996, or McKinsey – 2001 (Ober, 2016, p. 348). The first definition of employer branding was that it is the set of benefits (functional, economic and psychological) resulting from employment and work in a given organization (Zajac-Pałdyna, 2018, p. 205). Over time, other interpretations of this concept have arisen. Among others, M. Kozłowski recognizes that employer branding covers all activities carried out by the organization that support the achievement of business goals and that relate to creating the image of an attractive employer. According to P. Zaręba, the employer's image is a conscious creation built through the use of human resources and marketing tools and targeted at current and future employees, while A. Knap-Stefaniuk sees EB as also a strategy for creating positive associations with the workplace in potential and current employees (Knap-Stefaniuk, 2015, p. 109). Meanwhile, M. Spychała perceives EB to be all the actions taken to create the perfect place to work for currently employed people and future candidates. In the literature on the subject, employer branding is used interchangeably with the concept of employer image and is identified with the term 'employer brand' (Dewalska-Opitek, et al., 2016, p. 156).

The above definitions draw attention to two dimensions of EB, i.e. internal (directing activities to the current employee) and external (directing activities outside to attract a future employee). Activities related to the corporate image of both the client and employees can be implemented via the Internet through social media, website, company blog or corporate portals (Kwasek, 2015, p. 137). In the analyzed articles on the subject, the concept of employer branding was also associated with the term Employment Value Proposition (EVP), understood as a set of benefits offered to the employee by the employer, while also distinguishing the organization from other entities (Wojtaszczyk, 2012, p. 107).

From the point of view of hospitals struggling with insufficient number of white (medical) personnel, activities in the field of employer branding should be critical. According to research conducted among 1,723 nurses working in 30 Polish hospitals, about 25% of them would not recommend their hospital. This means that as many as 1/4 of nurses do not trust their workplace, do not identify with it and are dissatisfied with the level of cooperation with doctors or bureaucratic staff (Kózka, et al., 2016, p. 447).

As a result of the conducted literature research, factors influencing the image of hospitals on the labour market were distinguished and presented together with the division into individual areas (Table 2).

**Table 2.***Factors affecting the employer's image - the external dimension*

Factors affecting employer branding			
Area	Internal dimension - employee	External dimension - candidate	Area
Work comfort	Activities integrating employees, e.g. integration trips, Christmas Eve	Organizing "open days" by the hospital	Additional activities undertaken by the hospital
	Certainty, stability of employment	Implementation / participation in activities related to environmental protection	
	Positive employee relations	Implementing / participating in socially beneficial activities, e.g. for the benefit of the local community	
	Teamwork	Implementing / participating in activities promoting an active and healthy lifestyle	
	Compliance with laws, ethics, internal procedures and regulations by superiors.	Participation in job fairs	
	Friendly atmosphere in the workplace	Cooperation with Polish and foreign medical and research and development centers	
Internal communication	Hospital magazine / bulletin	Cooperation with universities	Internet communication (e-communication)
	Employee newsletter sent by email	Current update of information on the website	
	Direct meetings with the board / management / supervisor	Information on the website about benefits available to hospital employees	
	Efficient information flow	Hospital reviews available on the Internet	
	Information boards with announcements	Description of job offers available on the website	
Description of the recruitment process on the website			
Opportunity of self-development	Participation in conferences, scientific seminars	Having an account in business networking portals, e.g. LinkedIn, GoldenLine	Internet communication (e-communication)
	Participation in training gaining competences.	Having an account in social media, e.g. Facebook, Instagram	
	Gaining new experience in the workplace	Having a website	
Employment conditions	Non-wage benefits, e.g. MultiSport cards, additional insurance packages	Running a hospital blog	Advertising materials
	Extra pay	Publishing hospital videos of employees on their own YouTube channel	
	Possibility of promotion and clear rules for its granting	Online recruitment	
	Social benefits package	Placing hospital Internet value information on the website	
	Periodic employee evaluation system	Career tab on the employer's website	
Working conditions (infrastructure)	The amount of remuneration	Brochures, folders, information leaflets	Opinions of others
	Modern workplace equipment	Corporate gadgets, np., nick-nacks, pens	
	Providing access to means of work, e.g. computer, printer, stationery	Friends' opinions about the hospital	Opinions of others
	Aesthetics of the rooms	Position (place) in the national hospital rankings, e.g. Most Desirable Employers, "Top Employers" etc.	
Sanitary units for employees	Press information about the hospital	Legal and organizational conditions	
	Legal form of a hospital, e.g. LLC, Inc		
	Distance from home		
	Hospital size		

Note. Adapted from: "Idea zarządzania przez wartość dla pracownika" by A. Kwasek. 2015; " Nowe wyzwania stojące przed urzędami w Polsce – budowanie marki pracodawcy" by J. Dąbrowska. 2014; "Działania z zakresu wizerunku przedsiębiorstwa skierowane do pracowników" by U. Zając-Pałdyna. 2019; "Rola marketingu personalnego w kształtowaniu wizerunku organizacji naukowej" by A. I. Baruk. 2012; "Narzędzia employer branding w praktyce wybranych banków" by M. M. Stuss. 2016;

In the conducted research, 53 factors were identified. These were arranged alphabetically and assigned to five areas. Due to the specifics of running a hospital, the list excluded such factors as mobile working time, remote work and flexible working hours.

#### 4. Conclusion

Caring for the overall image of the organization, especially that of a hospital, seems justified due to, for example, increased consumer awareness, universal access to mass media, and the growing importance of the service area. A positive perception of the hospital as a good employer gives the opportunity to recruit and retain specialists and affects the level of commitment of current employees, which translates into an increase in the quality of provided services. Other benefits also include reduced staff turnover, increased loyalty and attachment to the workplace.

As pointed out by P. Para, in some countries, public relations in the organizational structure of entities in the field of health is universal and natural. For example, American hospitals use online communication to create the image of a hospital as a place identified with effective medical assistance, that is safe and patient-friendly, and as an entity engaging in preventive campaigns for detecting diseases at an early stage. In this case, the hospital does not only act as a service provider, but becomes a real economic value, and not only for the local community (Para, 2018, p. 13).

As a result of the conducted literature research, 96 factors influencing the image of hospitals were identified, 53 of which are responsible for the image of hospitals on the labour market. These factors can be divided into two dimensions, i.e. internal – benefits resulting from taking up work in a given hospital, and external – understood as conditions conducive to taking up work. Factors identified in individual dimensions allowed the emergence of five areas affecting the internal and external image of the employer. In each of the dimensions, the area of communication is repeated, whereby once as the hospital's area of communication with the employee and once with the candidate. Among the factors responsible for the overall image of the hospital, six areas were highlighted, with two common with the external dimension of the employer's image, i.e. communication and opinions of others (entities, persons).

Based on the analysis of the literature, it can be concluded that not all factors responsible for creating the enterprisal image of hospitals are self-generated. This is primarily due to the specifics of the activities carried out by hospitals that exclude even the remote work of medical



staff and the legal regulations governing the way the hospital functions. For example, these entities, as providing socially sensitive services, have a statutory ban on advertising activities. The legislator excludes the possibility for hospitals and other entities from the health sector to conduct any marketing campaigns encouraging, convincing or promoting the use of health services in a given entity; the ban only leaves the possibility of implementing strictly informational activities.

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