



# Hospital website in a cross-cultural context

By Jin, Ki Nam, Ph.D.

Over the past decades, the number of patients travelling abroad to get the treatment has increased. In contrast to the products, healthcare services are intangible in nature. It is difficult for patients to assess the competence of doctors or hospitals in other countries. Patients as consumers most often perceive the risk of a poor decision in the situation of choosing the doctor.

Patients initially look for the information from the internet and word-of-mouth from family and friends. Cultural difference affects the information searching behavior of patients. Hofstede(2001) classified cultures in 5 dimensions:

- 1. distance of power,**
- 2. control of uncertainty,**
- 3. individualism,**
- 4. masculinity,**
- 5. long-term orientation.**

His cultural framework has been widely used in advertising and marketing. Patients from collectivistic countries (e.g., Peru, Ecuador) give a higher trust to the advice from family and friends (Hoz-Correa & Munoz-Leiva, 2019). The KHIDI (Korea Health Industry Development Institute, 2018) conducted a survey in order to evaluate the satisfaction of 1200 foreign patients who visited South Korea. Most of the patients came from collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asian countries and CIS countries). In this study, 55% of the respondents replied that they relied on recommendations from family or friends, while 17% mentioned internet as main information source.

In a study (Gill & Singh, 2011) done in US representing individualistic culture, 73% of the respondents preferred internet, while 8% relied on family and friends. This implies that marketers need to consider the differential utility of information sources across the cultures. Information source influences intention to visit by forming cognitive impressions.

In spite of this cultural difference, hospital websites have been widely developed to connect with prospective medical travelers in the global healthcare market. Hospital website is still a useful platform for sharing informative message with patients. A well-designed website or SMS message can trigger the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Hospital website can help the patients to search for, evaluate, choose the doctor.

However, there are sometimes inflated claims of benefits associated with medical travel. Some hospitals or medical tourism facilitators exaggerate message or visual cue to attract the patients without any precautions of medical accidents or the assumed risks (Lee et al., 2014). Hence online patient decision processes become complicated. This implies that hospitals need to look for the information needs of patients and try to create the authentic information.

The website quality has been considered as the important factor for customer conversion and retention. Most of the hospital websites include the information on technology, competence of doctors, facilities, customer services, etc. The key characteristics of good hospital website are usefulness, attractiveness, and easiness to use. Some hospital websites fail to get the patients' attention

by creating unappealing message and design. The reason for this mistake is a failure to consider the customer's perspective and culture.

In some cases, hospitals simply translate the website contents into multiple languages to make multilingual sites. However, language translation is not enough. The hospital website should be customized to reflect the culture of the target country. While US hospital websites include a larger number of interactive features (Mason & Wright, 2011), hospital websites in Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Thailand, India) are weak in offering interactive services (Moghavvemi et al., 2017). Cosmetic surgery clinics usually upload the before-and-after pictures to the websites. The faces of Asian women on the photo would not give the idea of surgical skills of doctors to western women because they are not familiar with Asian women's faces.

The visual cues and expressions should be carefully chosen to fit into the cultural context of target countries. The website planners need to improve cultural sensitivity. Hospital marketers should study the target markets thoroughly and compare important cultural differences in order to align medical travel marketing strategy to the target countries.

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