



CHOOSING A COURIER SERVICE: FACTORS IN CUSTOMER PREFERENCE

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Abstract

Courier services are an integral part of logistic customer service and constitute a vital element from the standpoint of customer satisfaction. The aim of this paper is to identify the factors which inform customer decisions to choose a courier service by means of a survey conducted with a randomly selected group of respondents. The results were obtained using a questionnaire made available ONLINE. Decisions concerning the choice of a particular courier company depend on many factors, i.e. shipping price, timeliness of delivery, waiting time, as well as order completion time and customer service. The study also addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the frequency of purchases through courier companies, showing that the lockdown affected that frequency substantially. The survey also found that courier and parcel stations are the most important form of delivery in the opinion of the respondents. It may be noted that, according to the survey, customers most frequently used courier services several times a month.

**UWARUNKOWANIA DECYZJI WYBORU USŁUG KURIERSKICH
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Słowa kluczowe: logistyka, logistyczna obsługa klienta, przewaga konkurencyjna.

A b s t r a k t

Usługi kurierskie stanowią nieodłączny element logistycznej obsługi klienta oraz są istotnym elementem z punktu widzenia satysfakcji klienta. Celem artykułu była identyfikacja uwarunkowań dotyczących decyzji wyboru usług kurierskich w opinii klientów. Podjętą problematykę zrealizowano, posługując się metodą badań ankietowych na losowo wybranej grupie respondentów. Zaprezentowane wyniki pozyskano w badaniu online z wykorzystaniem kwestionariusza ankiety udostępnionego drogą elektroniczną. Decyzje dotyczące wyboru usług konkretnej firmy kurierskiej zależą od wielu czynników, tj. ceny za przewóz, terminowości dostaw, czasu oczekiwania na przesyłkę, czasu realizacji zamówienia, obsługi klienta. W opracowaniu podjęto również wątek pandemii COVID-19 oraz jej wpływu na częstość dokonywania zakupów za pośrednictwem firm kurierskich. Stwierdzono, że pandemia COVID-19 w dużym stopniu wpłynęła na częstotliwość dokonywania zakupów za pośrednictwem firm kurierskich. W wyniku badań ankietowych wykazano również, że przesyłka kurierska oraz paczkomaty są najistotniejszą formą dostawy w opinii badanych. Warto zauważyć, że na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań można stwierdzić, że respondenci najczęściej korzystali kilka razy w miesiącu z usług firm kurierskich.

Introduction

Logistical customer service is described by B.J. La Londe and P.H. Zinszer (Szydełko, 2012, p. 194-199), according to whom it comprises:

- all necessary activities, including pick-up, preparation, execution and financial handling of the customer orders, as well as resolving any issues that may occur;
- guaranteed and thoroughly efficient product delivery to the consumer while meeting all their needs;
- comprehensive activities involving each area of the business, with the aim of delivering products in such a form as to achieve the greatest possible satisfaction of customers.

Logistical customer service is a key element if a company is to achieve a competitive advantage. Courier services are used in practically every phase and element of logistical customer service. The ability to adapt to customers' needs and expectations translates into trust and favourable relations with the purchaser. The local services segment makes it possible to satisfy the following requirements:

- readiness for collection – service delivery time,
- shipment size – price – form of payment,
- additional services (cash on delivery, insurance, receipt).

Currently, X-press Couriers is one of the leaders, providing local services in the largest cities in Poland (Warsaw, Krakow, Wrocław, Katowice, Łódź, Poznań, Szczecin, Gdańsk). The company gains a significant advantage by providing services using vehicle and bicycle couriers. This offers the possibility of a much smoother ride through a congested city (Ratajczak & Lorenc, 2015, p. 1251-1261).

The principal criteria, as well as elements of logistic customer service with regard to courier services, include the following (Coyle *et al.*, 2010, p. 447-458; Barcik & Kubański, 2012, p. 393-402):

- order completion time in relation to the supplier or the customer;
- efficiency, which enables the purchaser to maintain adequate stock levels without the need for safety stock;
- communication, which enables the effective flow of information between specific departments within a company, as well as in a customer-seller relationship;
- customer convenience, which, in order to be achieved, requires a specific organisation to be highly flexible with respect to each link in the supply chain;
- reliability: standardised or expected delivery cycle time, encompassing safety and performance accuracy; it should be identified as one of the vital elements of customer service.

Customer service is a concept which may be variously defined and considered an important asset. It involves all the activities necessary to collect, prepare, execute and bill orders made by consumers, as well as eliminate errors at any point, should they occur. It is also a comprehensive effort in which all spheres of business cooperate mutually to perform the delivery and ensure invoicing of the organization's goods, taking advantage of methods which satisfy the buyer and promote the pursuit of the company's goals (Kuraś, 2013, p. 324-335).

The measurement and evaluation of customer service quality is indispensable when seeking to optimize the quality of logistical customer service since this is how an advantage over the competitors can be gained, while modern solutions offered by logistical operators enable modifications in the supply chains they operate.

Research methodology

The main objective of this study was to identify the determining factors behind customer preference for particular courier services. An attempt was made to answer four research questions:

1. Which element of logistical customer service has the greatest impact on the choice of a courier company in the opinion of the respondents?
2. How often do respondents make purchases online and use courier companies?
3. To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the frequency of making purchases online with courier delivery?
4. Which forms of delivery are the best according to the respondents?

The following research hypothesis was formulated: In the opinion of customers, the price of shipping is the primary factor determining the choice of services of courier companies.

In order to verify the above, a survey method was used, with 128 respondents taking part. Respondents were selected randomly, but due to the limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the group was confined to internet users.

A questionnaire was employed as a research tool; it was made available to respondents online so that the researcher's influence on the respondents and the obtained results was relatively low (Bendkowski, 2016, p. 25-38).

The survey questionnaire contained only close-ended questions concerned with the importance of factors influencing decisions to a courier company, the frequency of online purchases, the frequency of using courier companies, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency of purchases via courier companies, and the importance of delivery forms of the ordered merchandise.

The considerations presented in the paper can be a starting point for further research and a more precise and detailed analysis of the vision. Logistical customer service is a field that evolves and develops relatively quickly in practical as well as theoretical contexts. Knowledge of this issue is therefore crucial, for instance, when a company intends to increase its competitive advantage.

Identification of determinants of courier service selection decisions as perceived by customers

Logistical customer service consists of many elements, each of which involves distinct characteristics and applies to various areas of providing satisfaction to the customer. Determination of which of the elements is the most essential is entirely subjective and contingent on the preferences of the individual customer. The process is highly complex, ultimately aiming to provide the highest level

of customer satisfaction and content. With individual factors described using a scale where (1) is the least important and (3) the most important, it is possible to determine – in the most precise, consistent and reliable manner – which factors influence the choice of a courier company to the greatest and the least extent. The results of the survey, which demonstrate the distribution of factors affecting respondent preferences with respect to a courier company, are presented in Table 1.

Competitiveness is also a significant factor which, according to Ch. Hampden-Turner and A. Trompenaars, consists of simultaneous competition and cooperation that results in the acquisition of the knowledge of relevant technologies and thorough insights into customers' needs and requirements (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000, p. 7-35).

Table 1

Importance of factors influencing the decision to choose a courier company
in the opinion of the respondents

Importance scale	1	2	3	Average
Factor	structure in %			
Shipping price	3	24	73	2.70
Order completion time	6	40	54	2.48
Availability of delivery times	13	41	46	2.33
Waiting time	5	33	62	2.56
Communicativeness of staff	38	45	17	1.80
Flexibility of order placement	21	45	34	2.13
Complaint options	13	36	52	2.39
Order integrity	6	37	57	2.51
Delivery integrity	7	41	52	2.45
Technical support	23	57	20	1.98
Ease of order placement	16	35	48	2.32
Interaction with company staff	37	34	29	1.92
Timeliness of deliveries	5	28	66	2.61
Various payment options	8	42	50	2.42
Tracking information/Status updates	7	37	56	2.49
Warranty on shipment	11	39	50	2.39
Polish company	36	37	27	1.91
Company reputation	16	43	41	2.24
Personal experience	13	35	52	2.40
Customer service	10	37	53	2.43

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

Given the obtained results, it may be stated that the factors which the respondents considered the most important were shipping price (2.70), timeliness of delivery (2.61) and waiting time (2.56), whereas the factors they found the least important were Polish company (1.91), interaction with the company's staff (1.92) and the communicativeness of the staff (1.80).

When analysing the responses in relation to the importance of individual factors, it follows that the shipping price, timeliness of delivery and waiting time were the most important factors in the opinion of the respondents. A Polish company, i.e. the origin of the company, ranked among the least important elements. This may indicate that the majority of respondents do not decide to choose a particular courier company on the basis of its origin, or they do not have sufficient information to determine the nationality of a given company. In addition, interaction with the company staff and their communicativeness were the least important factors. It would suggest that in most cases or throughout the process cycle, order placement and delivery are carried out without interaction with the staff or without any human factor being involved because most of the process or the entire process is automated.

Taking studies by other authors into account, it can be stated that when choosing the delivery methods, 58.95% of the respondents pay attention to delivery cost, 30.31% are concerned with delivery time and 8.15% with parcel safety. Only 2.59% of respondents indicated other aspects, such as the possibility to collect the parcel later if not present at the time of delivery (advice), which works particularly in favour of parcel stations (Mościcka & Grześ-Bukłaho, 2019, p. 87-101).

When asked about their preferences with regard to the area of transport-shipment-logistics (TSL) company operations, the respondents gave consistent answers. 79.4% of the respondents would largely choose a domestic logistics provider, while 6.06% would prefer a European/global enterprise. Only 4.84% of the respondents opted for a local company, although the vast majority of companies are, in fact, international, with the exception of Poczta Polska (Dyczkowska, 2015, p. 447-458).

The results obtained differ somewhat from the findings of other relevant studies in the field. This is particularly evident in the case of research by A. Gulc, in which price was not the most important factor either, but information and communications technology (ICT) solutions or confidence in the company were rated definitely higher from the customers' point of view (Gulc, 2017, p. 36-45).

When considering logistical customer service, one cannot fail to consider the type of company which provides given services due to the fact that each company, in this case, DHL, is characterized by a different operational modality and adaptation of their offer to a particular target customer of that enterprise. Respondents' preferences regarding the importance of factors in logistical customer service provided by DHL are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Importance of factors influencing customer decisions to choose DHL
as their courier service provider

Importance scale	1	2	3	Average
Factor	structure in %			
Shipping price	9	37	82	2.57
Order completion time	5	53	70	2.51
Availability of delivery times	11	62	55	2.34
Waiting time	14	51	63	2.38
Communicativeness of staff	28	65	35	2.05
Flexibility of order placement	19	56	53	2.27
Complaint options	17	53	58	2.32
Order integrity	12	51	65	2.41
Delivery integrity	17	45	66	2.38
Technical support	25	69	34	2.07
Ease of order placement	9	51	68	2.46
Interaction with company staff	24	64	40	2.13
Timeliness of deliveries	7	44	77	2.55
Various payment options	8	54	66	2.45
Tracking information/Status updates	15	45	68	2.41
Warranty on shipment	13	61	54	2.32
Polish company	35	53	40	2.04
Company reputation	10	68	50	2.31
Personal experience	10	54	64	2.42
Customer service	12	48	68	2.44

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

The above responses indicate that respondents rank shipping price (2.57), timeliness of delivery (2.55) and order completion time (2.51) the highest, while the factors which they found least important were Polish company (2.04), technical support (2.07) and communicativeness of the staff (2.05).

Analysing the responses in relation to the importance of individual factors, it follows that shipping price, timeliness of delivery and order completion time were the most important factors in the opinion of respondents. The factor which the respondents declared the most important for DHL was order completion time. On the other hand, a Polish company, technical support and communicativeness of its staff were the least important factors, with technical support scoring the lowest.

The importance of factors in logistical customer service was also examined with respect to Poczta Polska. Respondents' preferences regarding the importance of factors in logistical customer service provided by Poczta Polska are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Importance of factors influencing customer decisions to choose Poczta Polska as their courier service provider:

Importance scale	1	2	3	Average
Factor	structure in %			
Shipping price	8	28	92	2.66
Order completion time	10	45	73	2.49
Availability of delivery times	14	56	58	2.34
Waiting time	20	46	62	2.33
Communicativeness of staff	31	56	41	2.08
Flexibility of order placement	18	58	52	2.27
Complaint options	18	59	51	2.26
Order integrity	13	48	67	2.42
Delivery integrity	21	66	41	2.16
Technical support	20	66	42	2.17
Ease of order placement	30	52	46	2.13
Interaction with company staff	13	52	63	2.39
Timeliness of deliveries	9	49	70	2.48
Various payment options	13	55	60	2.37
Tracking information/Status updates	13	58	57	2.34
Warranty on shipment	29	52	47	2.14
Polish company	9	63	56	2.37
Company reputation	19	47	62	2.34
Personal experience	13	45	70	2.45
Customer service	8	28	92	2.66

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

Analysing the results obtained, it may be stated that shipping price (2.66), order completion time (2.49) and customer service (2.66) were the most important factors in the opinion of the respondents. The factors which the respondents declared to be the least important were a warranty on the shipment (2.14), ease of order placement (2.13) and the communicativeness of the staff (2.08).

The rationale behind the factor rating for DHL and Poczta Polska was to compare a Polish company with a foreign equivalent in the context of logistical customer service. Based on answers concerning the importance of individual factors, it can be concluded that the shipping price, customer service and order completion time were the most important factors in the opinion of the respondents. Consequently, one readily sees that customer service is one of the leading factors to which the respondents attach significance in logistical

customer service. Meanwhile, warranty on shipment, ease of placing the order and communicativeness of the staff were the least important factors in the opinion of the respondents.

Since logistical customer service is a vital aspect which cannot be disregarded when developing a competitive advantage, it was important to determine how often respondents made online purchases in view of the fact that the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in addition, was conducted using an online questionnaire. Figure 1 shows the results concerning the frequency of online shopping.

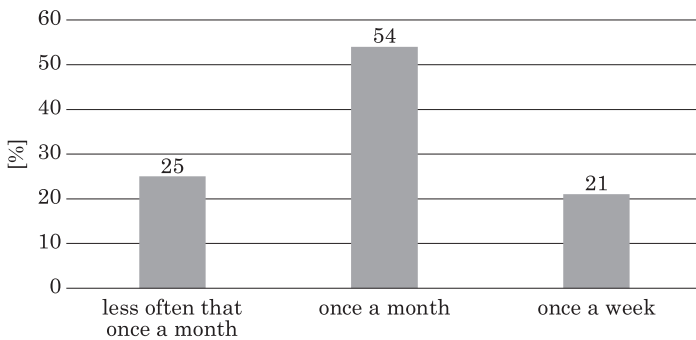


Fig. 1. Respondent opinions on the degree of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency of purchases via courier companies (in %)

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

The survey demonstrates that the highest proportion of respondents (54%) make purchases electronically once a month, while the fewest, i.e. 21%, make online purchases once a week.

The frequency of online shopping can depend on a number of external and internal factors, i.e. the demand for a certain product in a given month or the overall economic situation. Therefore, the reasons why customers make purchases more or less often cannot be unequivocally stated, but more than half of the respondents (54%) shop online once a month.

Other authors have determined that half of the respondents in their studies (50.09%) declared that they shop online once a month, while 34.83% make such purchases several times a month. Only 9.32% of respondents buy goods in online stores once a week, and 4.70% a few times a week. Only about 1% of those surveyed visit online stores every day. The frequency of shopping online shows that about 85% of the respondents shop occasionally. Considering the fact that e-commerce accounts for only 5% of the total retail turnover in Poland, the shopping frequency of the surveyed group can – roughly speaking – be considered typical for the Polish population of internet users (Mościcka & Grześ-Bukłaho, 2019, p. 87-101).

Another issue this study sought to clarify was how often the respondents use the services of courier companies. On this basis, it is possible to assess the extent to which courier companies in Poland are popular or frequently chosen as intermediaries in product delivery, as well as determine the frequency of purchases delivered mostly by courier companies while taking product types into account. The results showing how often customers rely on courier service providers are presented in Figure 2.

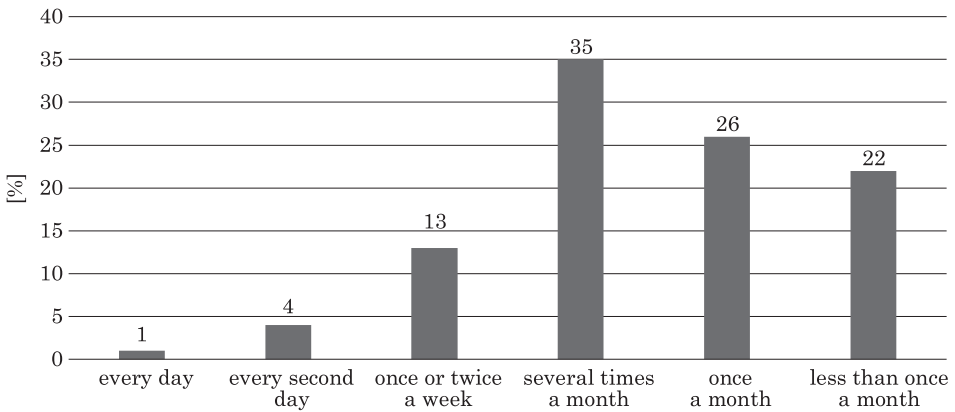


Fig. 2. Frequency of using courier services (in %)

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

The above demonstrates that the respondents most frequently used courier services several times a month (35%); customers who declared using courier services every day or every other day were the least numerous group (5%).

It follows from the obtained results that courier companies were used relatively often by those surveyed as shipping providers. This may be due to a range of factors informing such a choice, i.e. delivery costs involved in this means of shipping, as well as delivery waiting time. Therefore, the offer has to be adapted to the customer individually, catering to their expectations in terms of expenditure and quality. This is a very complex aspect and requires a more profound enquiry into the motivations and determinants of customer behaviour. The issue needs to be analysed in a manner which maximizes the efficacy of the actions taken and promotes a high frequency of such choices.

The answers returned show that 79% of individual customers rarely use the services of companies in the TSL industry, and only 21% do it often. However, with regard to business customers, the results were quite different; specifically, 72% of companies use courier services often and very often, while only 28% do it seldom or very seldom (Dyczkowska, 2015, p. 447-458).

Drawing on the results obtained by other authors, more than half of the respondents (58%) contact a company in order to make enquiries or make

a transaction at least once a month, with as many as 27% using its services once a week or more often. Contact less frequent than once a year is declared by 23% of respondents, while 19% of customers place orders with a courier company once a quarter. The answers to this question allow the inference that a greater proportion of customers can be called loyal customers (Smolnik, 2016, p. 1546-1553).

Another important aspect was to assess the degree of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency of purchases through courier companies. The question had a closed form, with the possibility of selecting only one answer. In effect, it was possible to determine the magnitude of that impact quite accurately; the results are presented in Figure 3.

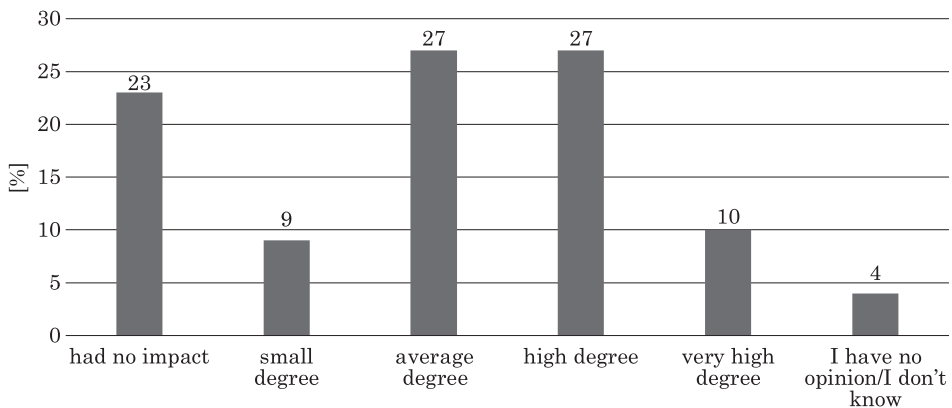


Fig. 3. Respondent opinions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency of making purchases through courier companies (in %)

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author

According to the respondents, the COVID-19 pandemic had a medium (27%) and large (27%) impact on the frequency of their online orders with courier delivery, while 23% declared that the pandemic had no impact at all. The lowest proportion of the respondents (4%) had no opinion or could not estimate the degree to which the pandemic influenced the frequency of their purchases.

Receipt of delivery is as important as the payment for a purchase since it determines the waiting time for the shipment and its final cost. From the standpoint of courier companies, the main objective is to deliver the parcel in the shortest possible time while maintaining all quality standards. When choosing a courier company, the customer is guided by many component aspects which lead to the ultimate decision. All pertinent data are presented in Figure 4.

On the basis of obtained results, it may be stated that courier delivery (2.64) and parcel stations (2.63) are the most popular forms of delivery, while personal collection is the least popular (1.53).



Fig. 4. Reported importance of package delivery forms (in %)

Source: compiled from a survey conducted by the author.

Referring to the research of other authors, the respondents most often chose courier delivery (58.11%). Only 11.41% of respondents prefer deliveries by Poczta Polska, and 25.90% opt for collection from parcel stations. Personal collection in respective stores enjoys little popularity (3.28%). Among other responses, respondents indicated that they had no particular preference for a delivery method, but they did not state an alternative to the forms of delivery listed in the survey (Chodak & Łęczek, 2014, p. 25-43).

Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to identify the determining factors which motivate customers to choose a particular courier service. The main features which guided the choice of a courier company included shipping price, timeliness of deliveries and waiting time, as well as order completion time and customer service. All of these constitute the principal elements in logistical customer service. The study has thus achieved its objective, yielding reliable and substantive findings, from which it follows that, in terms of logistical customer service, the choice of a company was determined primarily by shipping price, an aspect that customers pay most attention to and which affects customer preference to the greatest extent. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially influenced the frequency of purchases through courier companies resulting in a shift in customer habits. Most frequently, the respondents used courier services several times a month, while most shopped online once a month. Following this research and in the light of obtained results, it is legitimate to conclude that parcel stations and courier parcels tend to be chosen by customers most often as the forms of delivery available with courier companies. The research hypothesis formulated in this study was thus positively verified.

In short, logistical customer service and its principal elements significantly influence customer decisions with respect to courier services. The conducted research may offer a point of departure for further, more complex analyses of the issue.

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