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Analysis of Customer Loyalty Factors in the Business Market of Ukraine (Using the Example of the Baking Industry)

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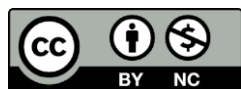
ABSTRACT

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The current state of loyalty of Ukrainian customers in the market of industrial goods in the segment of baking technological solutions is analyzed in this article. Key factors that determine the level of satisfaction and loyalty of business customers to suppliers of innovative technological solutions for the baking industry of Ukraine are identified. The study analyzes several factors that affect customer loyalty to the goods and services of the "Enzym" company and the "Innovative Center for Baking "Khlibnyi Dim", which is a separate strategic business unit of the enterprise. As part of the scientific study, a sociological survey of 50 customers was conducted and key determinants of loyalty were identified, among which a special place for Ukrainian buyers is occupied by: stable quality, technological efficiency and professional service. It is proven that the transparency of the pricing policy, the diversity of the assortment and the convenience of packaging significantly affect the emotional component of loyalty, forming a sense of trust and orientation to customer needs. Several issues regarding the transparency and validity of the pricing policy of the business unit "Innovative Center for Baking", Khlibnyi Dim" were identified. The need for expanding the range and optimizing packaging forms to better meet customer needs was proven. A comprehensive approach to further research is proposed, which includes: an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the level of customer satisfaction with individual aspects of cooperation (price, range, quality, service) and the integral loyalty indicator; building a customer satisfaction assessment model based on fuzzy logic or machine learning methods; researching the perception of prices by key customer segments and benchmarking the range of the "Innovative Center for Baking "Khlibnyi Dim" of the Enzym company.

KEYWORDS

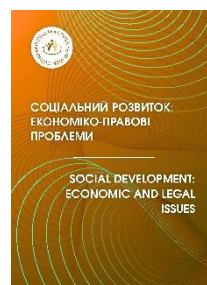
customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, personal selling, pricing policy, strategic range management, baking mixes, confectionery mixes, yeast, business market.



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Аналіз чинників лояльності покупців на діловому ринку України (на прикладі хлібопекарської галузі)

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СТАТТЯ

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У науковій статті проаналізовано сучасний стан лояльності українських клієнтів на ринку товарів промислового призначення у сегменті хлібопекарських технологічних рішень. Виявлено ключові чинники, що визначають рівень задоволеності та лояльності бізнес-клієнтів до постачальників інноваційних технологічних рішень для хлібопекарської галузі України. У межах дослідження проаналізовано ряд чинників, які впливають на лояльність клієнтів до товарів і послуг компанії «Ензим» та «Інноваційного центру хлібопечення «Хлібний Дім», що є окремим стратегічним господарським підрозділом підприємства. В межах наукового дослідження проведено соціологічне опитування 50 клієнтів та визначено ключові детермінанти лояльності, серед яких особливе місце для українських покупців займають: стабільна якість, технологічна ефективність і професійний сервіс. Доведено, що прозорість цінової політики, різноманіття асортименту та зручність фасування істотно впливають на емоційну складову лояльності, формуючи відчуття довіри й орієнтації на потреби клієнтів. Виявлено ряд питань до прозорості та обґрунтованості цінової політики бізнес-одиниці «Інноваційний центр хлібопечення «Хлібний Дім». Доведено потребу в розширенні асортименту та оптимізації форм фасування для кращого задоволення потреб клієнтів. Запропоновано комплексний підхід до подальших досліджень, який передбачає: поглиблений аналіз взаємозв'язку між рівнем задоволеності клієнтів окремими аспектами співпраці (ціна, асортимент, якість, сервіс) та інтегральним показником лояльності; побудову моделі оцінювання задоволеності клієнтів на основі нечіткої логіки або методів машинного навчання; дослідження сприйняття ціни ключовими сегментами клієнтів і проведення бенчмаркінгу асортименту «Інноваційного центру хлібопечення «Хлібний Дім» компанії «Ензим».

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

лояльність клієнтів, задоволеність клієнтів, персональний продаж, цінова політика, стратегічне управління асортиментом, хлібопекарські суміші, кондитерські суміші, дріжджі, діловий ринок.

1. Introduction

In the modern environment of professional bakery production, competition among suppliers of food solutions in Ukraine shows an upward trend. Continuous improvement of technologies, increasing requirements for product quality and efficiency of production processes, and changes in consumer needs and demand create serious challenges for supplier companies operating in the business market of Ukraine.

Under such conditions, it is extremely important to build customer loyalty to the company producing bakery products. This is even more true in the business market, where the level of trust and loyalty are mandatory requirements for long-term cooperation and interaction. Despite the importance of forming and maintaining loyalty for bakery enterprises in Ukraine, which regularly purchase appropriate technological solutions, such research in the field of marketing is not enough. Scientific works in related sectors of the food industry give grounds to assert that the factors that form the loyalty of business customers are complex and not always linear.

Accordingly, several problems remain unsolved for the business market (B2B) of Ukraine, in particular: (1) specific factors (price, assortment, service, technological support, packaging, logistics) that most affect customer loyalty in the business market (B2B customers) in the baking industry have not been sufficiently studied; (2) there is no clear understanding of the significance of various loyalty factors in today's conditions and the adaptation of suppliers to current changes; (3) there is a lack of practically-oriented recommendations for suppliers-manufacturers of product solutions in the baking industry, which can increase customer loyalty and increase the effectiveness of partner satisfaction management, which, ultimately, will contribute to the growth of competitiveness.

Thus, in modern business conditions, there is a need for a systematic analysis of the factors that form the loyalty of B2B customers to product solutions in the bakery industry, taking into account the specifics of the industry, technological requirements, market conditions, and the current marketing macro environment.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increase in attention in the scientific community to the study of consumer loyalty in the consumer and business markets. Scientists focus special attention on the food industry, which occupies a special place among the sectors and sectors of the national economy of Ukraine. At the same time, the level of research on customer behavior and the establishment of interaction in the business market in the field of food industry and production of ingredients in Ukraine is insufficient.

Foreign studies emphasize that loyalty in the B2B market is multidimensional and is formed mainly through the quality of relationships, trust and customer satisfaction. A number of scientific papers [9] indicate that the quality of relations between companies in the business environment is determined by three key components: trust, satisfaction and commitment to the supplier, which together create the basis for stable loyalty. The authors emphasize that in business markets, it is human interaction that has a greater impact than the product itself.

Similar conclusions are presented in the study "Factors Affecting Customer Loyalty and Satisfaction on B2B Food and Beverage Sector" [10]: it is proved that the key factors in the formation of loyalty are product quality, effective communication, supplier flexibility and the level of after-sales support. The authors also emphasize that customer satisfaction acts as an intermediate link between the perception of the value of the product and real loyalty.

According to the analytical study "Customer loyalty in Food B2B: A strategic approach for manufacturers, suppliers and wholesalers" [1], effective interaction with B2B customers in the food ingredients sector involves systematic management of the experience of cooperation, sustainability in product quality, and transparency in relationships. One of the key areas of increasing loyalty is the development of innovative solutions that can meet the technological needs of bread and confectionery manufacturers.

In turn, S. Gounaris and A. Almores in their scientific work "A dynamic, relational approach to B2B customer experience" [4] emphasize the importance of an integrated approach to customer experience

management in a B2B environment. They prove that strategic partnerships, joint problem solving, and professional technical support significantly increase loyalty levels even in highly competitive industries.

Domestic scientists also pay attention to the study of customer loyalty in the business environment. In particular, some authors [5] note that building B2B customer loyalty should be based on creating unique value for the partner, introducing flexible forms of communication and interaction, and adaptive service models.

Also, Y. Leyba, M. Shyrokopetleva and I. Gruzdo [8], studying modern methods of measuring customer loyalty in Ukraine, note the need to combine quantitative and qualitative indicators – such as the level of trust, readiness for repeated purchases and emotional perception of the brand.

Both foreign and Ukrainian scientific sources confirm that the loyalty of B2B customers in the production of food ingredients, in particular bakery, is formed under the influence of a complex of factors. Among them, the key ones are: product quality, stability of supply, technical support, flexibility of cooperation, professional communication provided through effective personal selling [7] and focus on long-term partnerships.

3. Problem Statement

The article is aimed at analyzing the current state of loyalty of Ukrainian customers in the business market of bakery technological solutions, identifying the key factors that determine the level of satisfaction and loyalty of business customers to suppliers of innovative technological solutions in the baking industry.

Among the main tasks of the study, which were solved on the example of a bakery enterprise, it is worth highlighting:

- to assess the perception of consumers of the price-quality ratio of products in the bakery industry of Ukraine;
- to find out the effectiveness of the pricing policy in the food industry in the business market;
- to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the commodity policy of enterprises in the business market of Ukraine;
- to evaluate the effectiveness of personal sales in the B2B market of Ukraine in the baking industry.

4. Methods and Materials

The process of scientific research was based on the consistent application of scientific methods, starting from the empirical stage of collecting information to its subsequent statistical generalization and interpretation. The main method of collecting primary data was surveys. The obtained quantitative data are processed using statistical analysis methods. To interpret and present the results of the survey, the method of graphical analysis was used, which made it possible to visually reflect the distribution of answers according to various criteria. To assess the market position of products and services of the enterprise, the method of comparative analysis was used. The methods of synthesis and systematic approach were used to summarize the identified factors, their hierarchy of influence on loyalty and identify key problem areas. The applied approach ensured the validity of conclusions on the determinants of B2B customer loyalty in the Ukrainian market in the baking industry.

5. Results and Discussion

With the development of market relations in Ukraine, we observe a constant increase in the level of competition in all domestic markets. The food industry, in particular the baking industry, is no exception. Against the backdrop of increased competition in the field of innovative technological solutions for the baking industry, suppliers clearly understand that long-term partnerships with B2B customers are the key to success. Creating such loyalty requires more effort, because it is based on a systematic approach to cooperation: prompt response, deep technical expertise and support, guaranteed availability to the desired assortment and maximum flexibility of purchase conditions. The ability to meet the needs of partners and consistently build strong cooperation with them are becoming decisive strategic advantages of market players.

The object of the study was the activities of the biotechnology company Enzym, which develops and manufactures products in Eastern Europe based on yeast cells. The company has its own research laboratory, which helps to provide partners in 23 countries of the world with food (Enzym Food Solutions), feed (Enzym Feed Solutions), alcohol (Enzym Alcohol Solutions) and bakery (Enzym Bakery Solutions) products based on yeast cell [3].

The study focuses on the bakery business – Enzym Bakery Solutions, which, according to the company's definition, "helps create tasty and nutritious food products for millions of consumers every day" [2]. The line directly includes pressed and dry yeast, offers a variety of innovative solutions for the baking and confectionery industries. The company focuses on "the quality and safety of food solutions confirmed by international quality standards" [2].

In order to find out the key factors of loyalty in the business market of Ukraine within the framework of product solutions for the baking industry, an internal survey was conducted among 50 customers (buyers in the B2B market) of the "Khlibnyi Dim Bakery Innovation Center". The survey was conducted in 10 different cities of Ukraine, where consumers of relevant goods are most concentrated.

The questionnaire contained four blocks of questions regarding customer satisfaction:

- 1) product price;
- 2) assortment of goods offered by the company;
- 3) product quality;
- 4) service level.

The "Price" block contained questions regarding the customers' perception of the price-value ratio, the compliance of prices with the competitive level, the transparency of the pricing policy and the efficiency of the product in the production process.

The "Assortment" block covered the issues of product satisfaction (in particular, with each product category: yeast, improvers, bakery and confectionery mixtures), ease of packaging, clarity of actions described on the instructions for the use of products, compliance of the assortment with technological needs and motivation for purchases from other manufacturers.

Questions in the "Product Quality" block focused on the stability of the characteristics of product batches and their efficiency in production processes.

In the "Service level" block, attention was paid to the qualitative characteristics of personal selling in the company, in particular, the key was to find out the professionalism of consultants, the speed of response to requests and the convenience of logistics processes.

According to the results of the survey, 52 % of respondents consider the price-quality ratio to be satisfactory; 44 % – partially corresponding, expecting better results; only 4 % are unsatisfactory (Fig. 1).

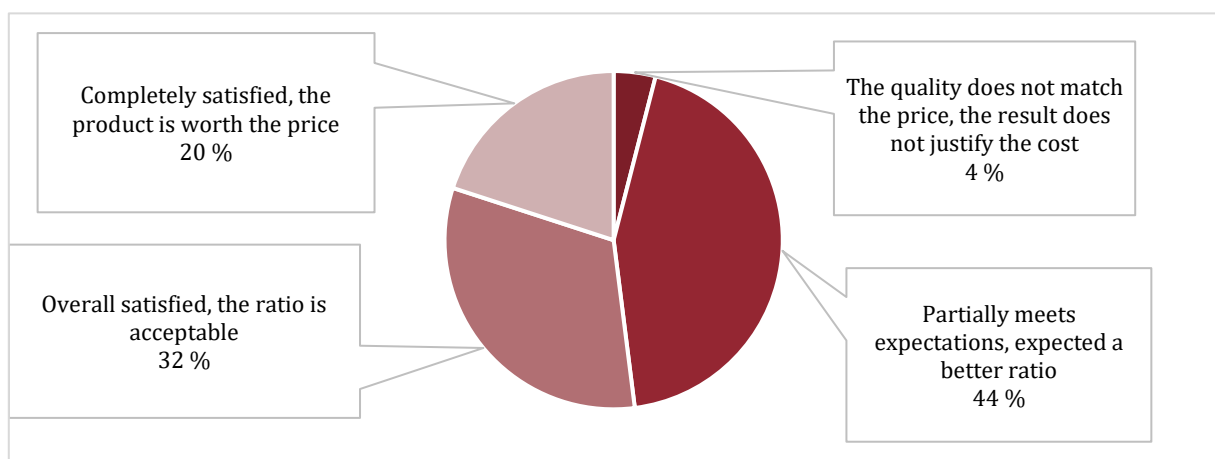


Figure 1. Respondents' answers regarding the ratio of price and quality of "Khlibnyi Dim" products

Source: Developed by the authors.

Assessing the competitiveness of the company's pricing policy made it possible to find out that most customers consider products to be relatively more expensive than market analogues. Thus, 20 respondents noted a higher level of prices compared to competitors; 15 – The prices are partially acceptable, but they still consider other alternatives. Only 7 respondents consider prices to be adequate, and 5 consider prices more favorable than competitive ones (Fig. 2).

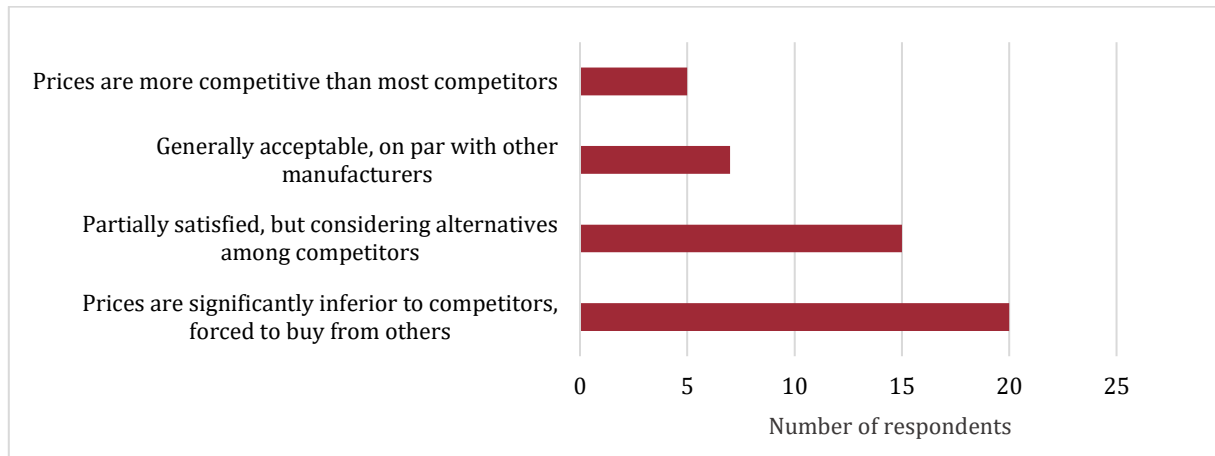


Figure 2. Respondents' answers regarding the compliance of the price of the "Khlibnyi Dim" products
Source: Developed by the authors.

It is important to note that only half of the respondents consider the pricing policy and mechanisms for forming prices for products to be clear, which indicates the need for closer interaction with buyers in matters of the contractual policy of the enterprise. Accordingly, 50 % of respondents consider the pricing policy to be generally understandable, but one that requires greater transparency; 30 % note insufficient reasonableness of prices; 12 % of respondents assess the pricing policy as completely transparent; 8 % of customers, the pricing mechanism is incomprehensible and requires a deeper explanation.

As part of the study, we also sought to understand the correspondence between the company's price and offer and, accordingly, the efficiency of the production process. The survey showed that (Fig. 3):

- 14 customers are completely satisfied with the price-result ratio;
- 10 – believe that the price mostly corresponds to the efficiency of the production process;
- 23 people noted that the cost of products is only partially justified;
- 3 respondents consider the price completely unjustified.

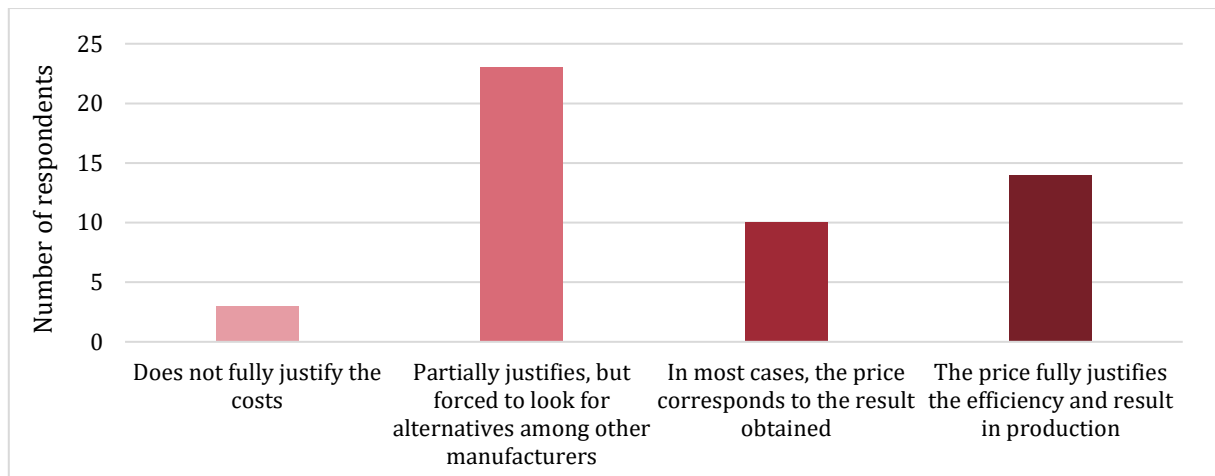


Figure 3. Respondents' answers regarding the extent to which the costs of Khlibnyi Dom's products justify the production result

Source: Developed by the authors.

As for the assessment of the level of customer satisfaction with the assortment of "Khlibnyi Dim", 70 % of respondents consider the assortment of "Khlibnyi Dim" to be fully relevant to their needs, while 30 % noted partial satisfaction and noted that because of this they turn to products of other brands (Fig. 4). It should also be noted that buyers of bakery products are generally satisfied with the methods of packaging, packaging, and separation of products. Thus, 37 respondents are completely satisfied with the available forms and volumes of packaging of products, while 13 people made proposals for adjusting the volume of yeast packaging.

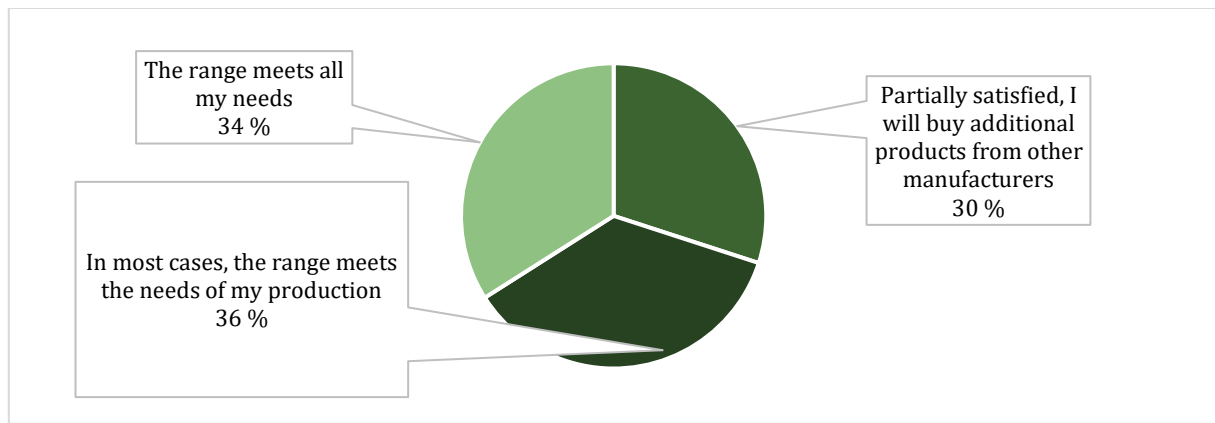


Figure 4. Respondents' answers regarding how wide they consider the range of products of "Khlibnyi Dim" to be

Source: Developed by the authors.

Since a significant part of customers were not completely satisfied with the range of products offered, a special study was additionally conducted to study the needs of individual product categories.

The results showed that the most popular are bakery mixtures and improvers, while yeast and confectionery mixtures are used by Ukrainian bakery manufacturers and confectioners in moderation or they focus on a different assortment.

Moreover, Ukrainian food industry enterprises prefer universal bakery mixes for everyday production, while niche mixes are used less often. 94.3 % of respondents noted that baking mixes optimize production processes. 46.5 % highly appreciated the variety of the assortment, 32.56 % were satisfied with the basic choice, and another 20.93 % considered the assortment limited.

The situation is similar in the market of improvers: the most popular are universal products that improve the structure of the dough and stabilize the processes of kneading dough and baking. That is why about 57 % of respondents highly appreciate the range of improvers. The rest of the customers partially or completely focus on other manufacturers. At the same time, it is worth noting that 25 % of respondents noted minor difficulties in using some of the dough improvers of the Enzym company, which they informed the company's sales employees.

As for yeast products, most customers use pressed yeast because of the convenience and stability of the result. Among buyers, according to the survey, 93.3 % use yeast of "Khlibnyi Dim" and are completely satisfied with the quality; 80 % – packaging and instructions. At the same time, 46.5 % of respondents noted that they turn to competitors for the purchase of yeast due to the lower price.

Confectionery mixtures are used sparingly by Ukrainian manufacturers. The most popular basic products for finishing and filling confectionery. In general, buyers of such goods are satisfied with the assortment of confectionery mixtures, this was noted by 55 % of respondents. At the same time, 25 % of respondents noted that they do not use brand products in this category. At the same time, customers of Khlebnyi Dom mainly buy confectionery mixtures of competitors because of the lower price.

The survey made it possible to identify a number of proposals that can be taken into account by the management of the company "Enzym" to expand the product policy and calculate the profitability of the new assortment. Customers expressed the need to expand the assortment, in particular: yeast with increased tolerance to sugar; sourdough starters for different types of bread; specialized mixtures for ciabata and pita bread; natural flavor enhancers; superfoods; products for dietary bread; fruit and chocolate fillings; decorative sprinkles; gelling agents and products of the Clean Label category.

After analyzing the satisfaction of the assortment, it is advisable to proceed to the evaluation of product quality by customers, since even a wide selection of products does not guarantee complete customer satisfaction without stable and high-quality products. The majority of respondents (35 people) assess the quality of products as stable, while the rest note isolated non-systemic deviations, in particular in the inappropriate smell, inconsistent color of products in different batches, and fragility of bakery products when sliced.

As for technological efficiency, 38 respondents (76 %) consider products created on the basis of Khlebnyi Dom products to be fully suitable for key production processes; 12 respondents (24 %) note limited versatility for niche formulations.

In the study, we sought to assess the effectiveness of personal sales of Enzym in the Bakery Solutions market, understanding the importance of this means of marketing communications for

enterprises operating in the market of industrial goods [7, p. 44, 94]. Therefore, the assessment of the professionalism of the staff testified to the high level of the company's sales representatives. Among the respondents, 37 people (74 %) confirmed the full competence of the employees of the "Innovative Bakery Center "Khlibnyi Dim", 8 people noted isolated cases of partial incompetence, only 5 people (10 %) indicated the need to improve the skills of the company's personnel (Fig. 5).

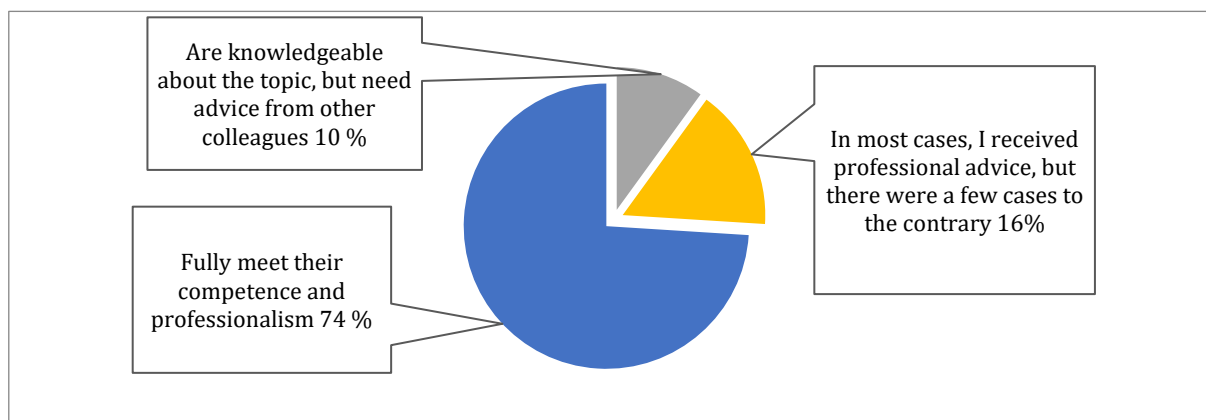


Figure 5. Respondents' assessment of the professionalism of managers and technical consultants of the "Khlibnyi Dim"

Source: Developed by the authors.

Also in the survey, we evaluated the reaction of Enzym sales employees to customer requests. As evidenced by the data of Fig. 6, the majority of respondents rated the efficiency of responding to requests and solving technical problems as "fast" or "very fast": 22 people noted a response within 1-2 days, 20 – a response on the day of the request, 8 respondents (16 %) had a negative experience regarding the speed of service. From our point of view, the figure of 16 % is quite high and requires a reaction of the marketing and commercial management department to the activities of its own personnel in order to find out in detail the relevant circumstances. It is advisable to introduce constant customer surveys in order to identify such negative experiences and increase the efficiency of personal sales of the company.

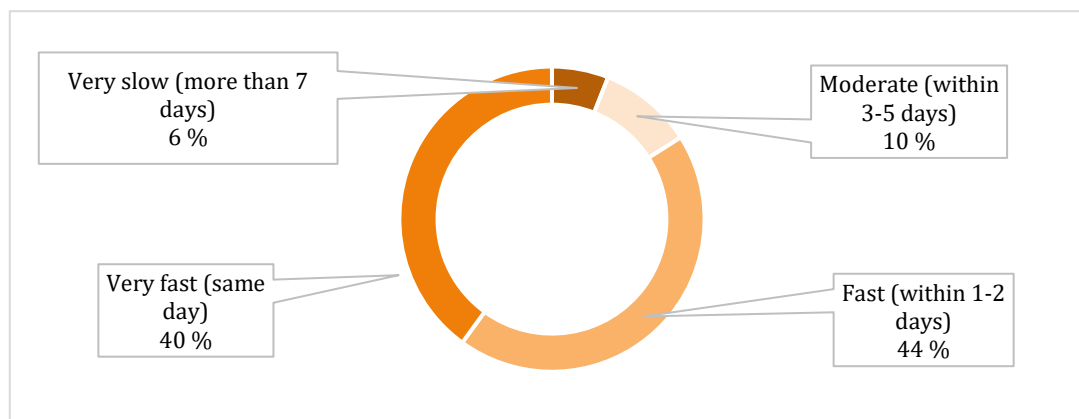


Figure 5. Respondents' assessment of the speed of response of the "Khlibnyi Dim" to requests or technical problems

Source: Developed by the authors.

The assessment of the ordering, delivery and logistics process turned out to be very high: 70 % of respondents consider it completely convenient, and 20 % consider it quite convenient if problems are quickly solved. However, 10 % of respondents indicated that there were minor problems, mainly related to delays and inconsistent shipment schedules.

6. Conclusions

The results of the customer survey of the "Innovative Bakery Center "Khlibnyi Dim" made it possible to identify the key factors influencing the formation of customer loyalty to the products of its production.

1. The greatest impact on the perception of the company's offer in the business market of Ukraine today is the stable quality and technological efficiency of products that provide predictable results in production. These parameters form the basic trust of customers and encourage them to repeat purchases, which is extremely important in the B2B market.

2. The second most important factor that determines the level of loyalty in the business market is the level of professional support and service. Quick response to requests, competence of managers, and convenience of logistics processes create a positive experience of interaction with the brand. This is the key to building close ties between producers (sellers) and buyers, a way to form long-term mutually beneficial relationships.

3. At the same time, such aspects as transparency of pricing policy, variety of assortment and convenience of packaging have a significant impact on the emotional component of loyalty, because they form a feeling of a personalized approach to the needs of the client.

4. The study showed the presence of certain problems in the pricing policy, the width of the assortment and forms of product packaging. These factors can reduce the level of emotional engagement of customers and weaken long-term commitment to the brand, despite the consistently high quality and effectiveness of products.

It is advisable to determine the directions of further research:

- in-depth analysis of the relationship between the level of satisfaction with certain aspects of cooperation (price, assortment, quality, service) and the integral indicator of loyalty;
- building a model for determining customer loyalty based on fuzzy logic or machine learning methods, which will simulate the impact of changes in pricing policy, assortment and packaging on loyalty, prioritize customer retention measures;
- research of price perception by key customer segments and benchmarking of the assortment of the "Innovative Bakery Center "Khlibnyi Dim" of the company "Enzym" among the main competitors.

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