

## AVATAR AS A TOOL SUPPORTING MODERN MARKETING AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PROCESSES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS

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**Purpose:** The aim of the publication is to present the results of own research on the use of traditional channels of conveying marketing messages with comments.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study used theoretical and empirical research methods. among the theoretical ones, an analysis and a literature query. On the other hand, as far as empirical methods are concerned, the results of research carried out by the War Studies University as part of a project financed by from EU funds, and concerning the possibility of using the avatar in local government units (Przysucha, Sulejówek).

**Findings:** The results of the research, combined with the analysis of the activity of petitioners and elements of strategic management, allow us to believe that the avatar has been very well received in the offices subjected to the pilot study, which in turn entitles us to put forward a thesis that the proposed solution can be an innovative and innovative tool used in the processes of supporting marketing communication and strategic management. This thesis is confirmed by the current global trends in the development of both modern marketing and management, development based on about virtualization, digitization, VR, MR or Avatars and industry 4.0.

**Research limitations/implications:** The main research limitation is that the issue is a new topic that has not yet been widely discussed in the literature.

**Practical implications:** The avatar was very well received in the offices subjected to the pilot, which in turn entitles us to make a thesis, that the proposed solution can be an innovative and innovative tool used in the processes of supporting marketing communication and strategic management.

**Originality/value:** The topic addressed is new and original, rarely discussed in the literature so far. The article presents the results of original research.

**Keywords:** strategic management, new technologies, avatar, local development, local government units.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

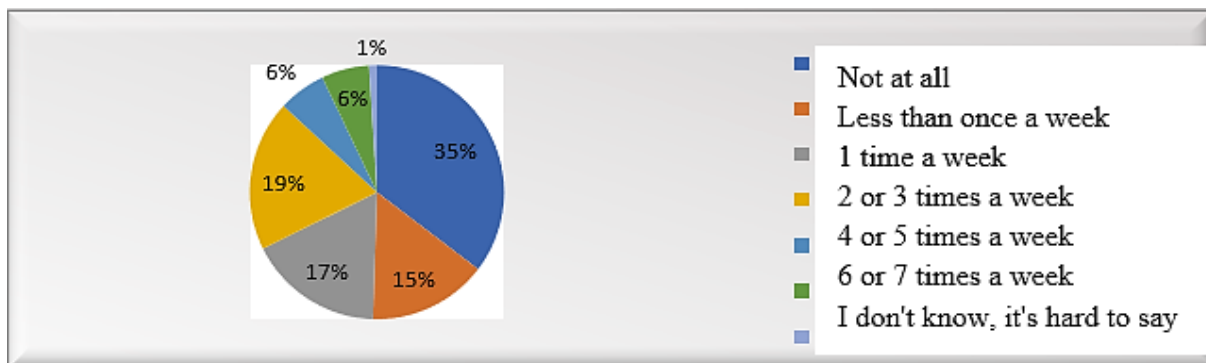
## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the traditional classic forms of communication with the customer, mentioned so far in the literature, do not fulfill their original functions - the influence of the Internet and social media on consumer decisions can be seen more and more often (Mikołajczyk, 2023, p. 12). This is where most of the most up-to-date and opinion-forming information comes from, which makes it easier to make the right consumer (and other) decisions. In order to assess the importance of individual marketing information exchange channels, a survey was conducted among a group of respondents aged 25-29 in the period 03-06.2020. The research was carried out using a questionnaire sent by e-mail to a selected group of students who met the age criterion indicated above. As a result of the conducted research procedure, answers were obtained from 124 people who were asked to indicate the marketing communication channels that are used by them most often (and why). Therefore, respondents had the opportunity to assess the most frequently used marketing communication channels from among those listed below (Kotler, 2021, p. 12):

1. TV,
2. radio,
3. press,
4. advertising banners - wall advertisements,
5. Leaflets,
6. e-mailing campaigns,
7. telephone marketing,
8. marketing szeptany,
9. fairs, exhibitions,
10. sponsoring,
11. Mobile visual ads.

On the basis of the analysis of the answers given, it should be concluded that the traditional (classical) means of communication are losing their importance. This is reflected in the data shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the structure of the response to the question about the use of television as a news channel.

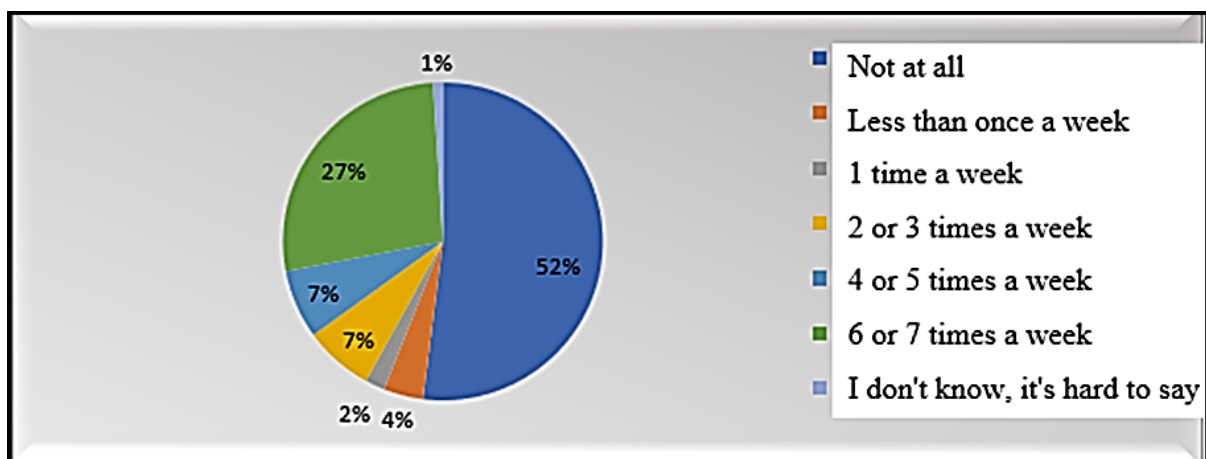
According to the presented data, 35% of respondents declare that they do not watch TV at all or watch it sporadically, once a week (another 32%). The above results allow us to believe that the role of television in providing information and marketing communication is becoming marginal among the studied group of people.



**Figure 1.** Structure of the answer to the question: How often do you use television as a means of communication?

Source: In-house analysis based on surveys.

A very similar situation exists with regard to the press. It is extremely common for contradictory information about the same event to be reported in different editions of newspapers. Catchy and, unfortunately, manipulated article titles are used in order to attract as many readers as possible. The respondents' answers about the importance of the press in marketing messages are presented in Figure 2.

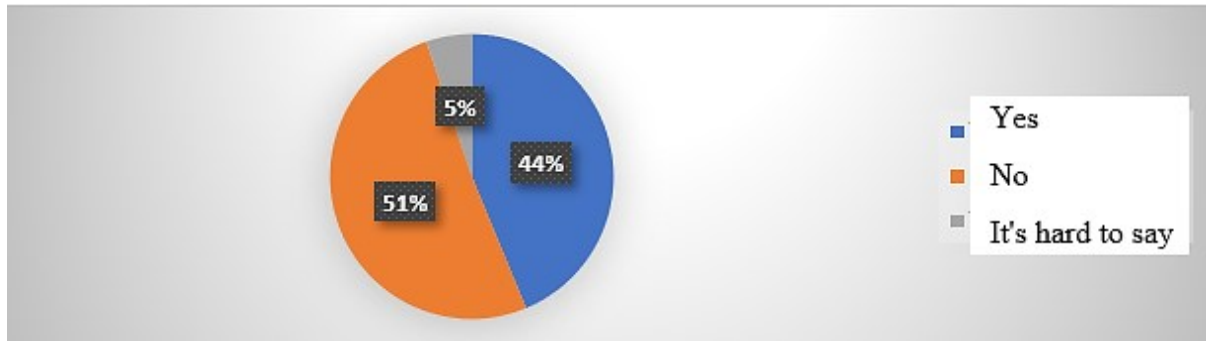


**Figure 2.** The importance of traditional press in marketing messages – answers to the question: How often do you buy and reads a paper newspaper?

Source: In-house analysis based on surveys.

It should be noted that over the last few years, an increase in demand for newspapers published in electronic form has been observed. According to M. Thompson, head of the New York Times, the newspaper will cease to be published in paper form within the next 20 years (Sherman, 2020, p. 5). On the other hand, according to the data presented by Empik and the TaniaKsiążka.pl portal, in 2020 an increase in the sales of e-books was recorded by as much as 20%. This report confirms the results of our own empirical research, on the basis of which it can be clearly stated that traditional editions of the paper press are a marginal way of conveying marketing messages with an emerging downward trend in the demand for the press.

Another popular medium that has been highlighted in marketing activities is radio. In the survey, the question was asked not about the fact of listening to the radio message itself, but about the degree of interest, understanding and remembering of marketing and advertising messages. The answers to the question about the problems indicated are shown in Figure 3.

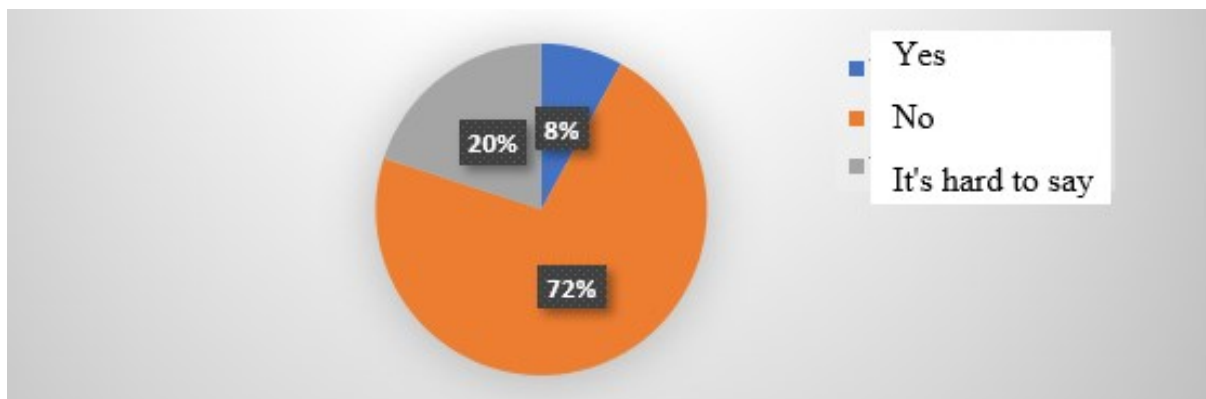


**Figure 3.** Structure of the answer to the question: Do you pay attention to radio advertisements?

Source: In-house analysis based on surveys.

It is worth emphasizing that in this case, it is not only the structure of the answers that is important, but also the commentary on them. In addition to their answers, the respondents claimed that although the radio receiver is turned on (e.g. while driving a car), focusing on other activities allows only a limited way to perceive advertising messages transmitted through the discussed medium.

Another traditional form of information transfer are (former) mailing campaigns and newsletters. Figure 4 presents the results of the answers to the question about the respondents' interest in mailing campaigns and newsletters.



**Figure 4.** Structure of the answer to the question: Are you interested in mailing campaigns and newsletters as a form of marketing communication?

Source: In-house analysis based on surveys.

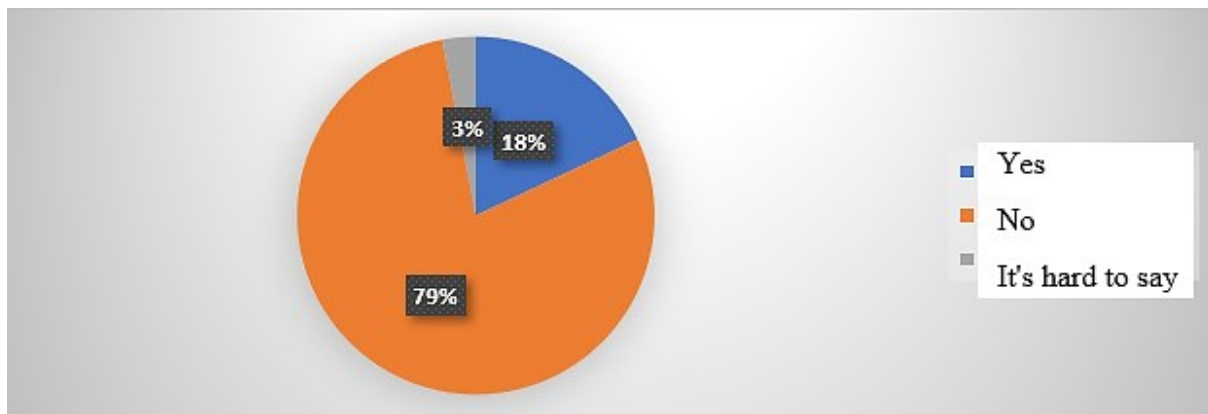
According to the conducted analyses, mailing campaigns or newsletters, until recently indicated as an interesting and effective marketing tool, do not fulfill any of the functions previously attributed to them.

Similar conclusions were formulated by the research team of First Orion Corporation, which proved that in 2020 as many as 90% of email users would be most willing to permanently block spam messages (FirstOrion, 2021). The results obtained by First Orion Corporation confirm the answers obtained in the presented results of its own empirical research.

Another issue of interest to the authors was the reception of marketing and advertising messages placed on banners, posters and leaflets. The distribution of responses to these questions is shown in Figure 5.

Fairs and exhibitions have been another popular form of marketing communication so far – unfortunately, in the face of the pandemic, this form of communication has practically ceased to exist and play any role. What's more, according to the authors, it should not be assumed that fairs and exhibitions will once again become part of the canon of effective marketing activities after the pandemic.

The situation is slightly different in the case of word-of-mouth marketing. This form of communication is still important in the sphere of services, which, due to their immateriality, are subject to specific marketing activities. According to the analysis of the results of the research, the role of word-of-mouth marketing, understood as a traditional channel of information transfer, is also decreasing, but it is being replaced by tools such as the Internet and social media. As confirmed by the respondents, advice is more often sought on the forum of social networking sites – it is easy to see how important the opinion of Internet users is to evaluate products or services and what impact it has on consumer decisions.



**Figure 5.** Structure of the answer to the question: Do you pay attention to marketing messages (advertisements) on banners, posters, leaflets?

Source: In-house analysis based on surveys.

According to the analysis of the results of surveys, traditional communication channels offered by marketing are not very attractive for people under 30 years of age. What's more, the respondents practically do not use them in everyday communication and do not pay attention to e.g. advertising campaigns posted there. Out of the proposed set of channels of information transfer, practically all of them were rejected, except for social media and the Internet. Therefore, other, even more innovative solutions for mutual communication and customer service should be proposed. This tool is an avatar with elements of artificial intelligence.

## 2. Strategic Management and Local Government Instruments

Management is a process that involves making various decisions and actions through a governing body. Its main goal is to ensure the effective and acceptable functioning of the organization while implementing the organization's policy (Sierak, 2013, p. 20). Throughout the management process, five basic functions can be distinguished, such as: planning, organizing, transmitting instructions, coordination, and controlling.

Strategic management, preceded by an appropriate strategic analysis, consists in formulating strategic goals and methods by which the organization will achieve its goals (Czekaj, Stabryła 2023, p. 15). In the longer term, strategic management focuses mainly on monitoring and controlling the implementation of strategic action plans. In addition, it works on the basis of a cyclical analysis of the state of development conditions of the organization, as well as identification and determination of main and intermediate goals. The main focus is on the periodic comparison of the objectives with the implemented activities.

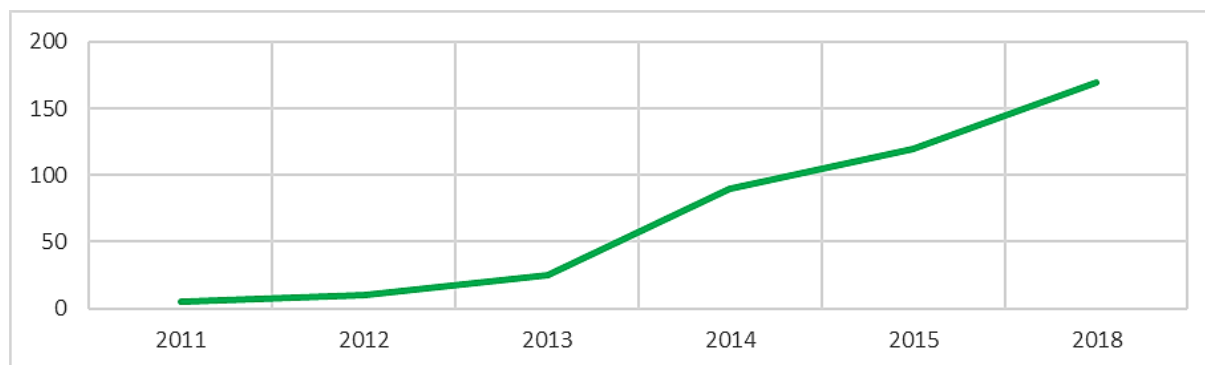
Strategic management in local government refers to the direction of the entire planning process, the selection of individual development goals and tasks that will be implemented in the future, the implementation of adopted studies, monitoring and control of the adopted ones. There are some differences between strategic management in an organization and strategic management in local government. They result mainly from the fact that the activities of local government units in the public sphere are regulated by administrative law. Additionally, the source of managerial power is based on public trust, as power is democratically elected. Moreover, local government units are institutions of public life, therefore they cannot be assessed on the basis of measurable economic figures. On the other hand, the costs of public services are assessed in relation to the quantity and quality of services provided. Another aspect is the subjective measure of the effects of strategic management for the common good of local communities (Orłowska, 2022, p. 443).

An important tool in strategic management is the local development strategy developed by the local government, but in order for it to be a relative whole, it must be considered multidimensionally. This means that it is necessary to take into account the changes taking place within the territorial unit and in its surroundings (external and internal factors), to identify the potential and strategic intention of individual entities. Its main purpose is to see the potential, the implementation of measures whose end product will be the provision of a sufficient number of jobs, and the associated income from employment, providing long-term financial and social security, which translates into the quality of life of the society. To this end, the local government is working to stimulate activity through three methods. Firstly, it is trying to maintain its existing activities by pursuing a policy of survival strategy. The second method is to implement an expansion strategy, which involves acquiring activities that induce economic growth. Last but not least, there is the strategy of creation, which consists in the implementation

of activities aimed at transforming the business, its aim is to ensure an increase in competitiveness (Wojciechowski, 2015, p. 32). The entity that manages the strategy is the local community, acting through its representatives, i.e. local authorities. It should be emphasized that this is possible by empowering local government units in the administrative and legal system of the state, as well as by providing them with the appropriate scope of tasks and financial resources for their implementation in the process of decentralization. Thanks to such conditions, the local government is assured of decision-making autonomy, i.e. the freedom to make decisions and choose the expected values and goals, activities for the creation and planning of local development, as well as the formulation of strategies and programs. Strategic management consists in estimating the current level of socio-economic development of a territorial unit, assessing its spatial development, i.e. taking into account internal factors. In addition, it is necessary to take into account its external conditions resulting from the relationship with the environment, i.e. external factors broken down into individual levels, e.g. social, economic, technological, the possibility of using natural resources. In addition, it focuses on the needs of local communities, which are often reported by them themselves by means of applications and requests, and which may be quantitative and qualitative in nature (Ziółkowski, 2015, p. 12).

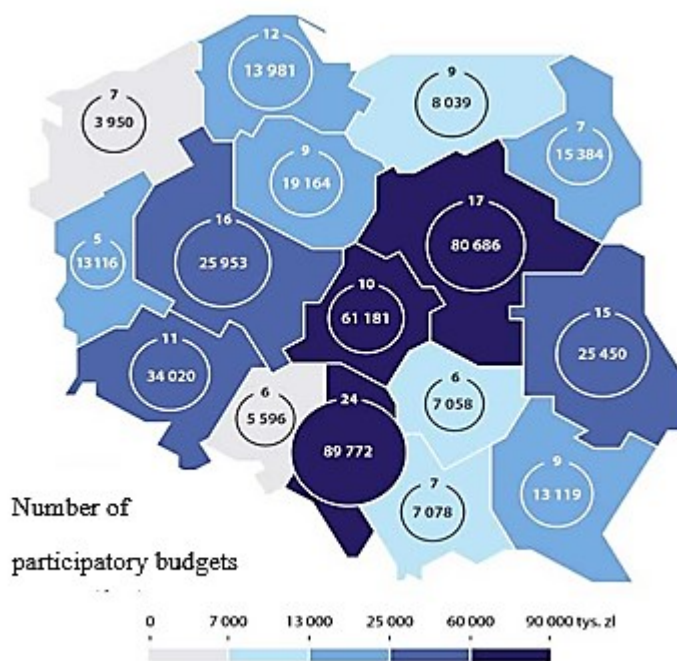
As noted by the researchers, the basis of the strategic management process is creativity, which has been defined as the ability of local government authorities to formulate and solve problems of a municipality or county through the use of methods and techniques of planning in functioning, aimed at the development of local government units (Lisowska-Szron, 2018, p. 232). Therefore, the development of the region depends on the appropriately directed creativity of local governments. This means that in local government, as well as in an enterprise, in the event of management problems, a non-standard approach should be applied, i.e. going beyond the framework of thought. With the help of these actions, an opportunity arises that allows you to gain an advantage over a potential competitor. These actions may be based on new assumptions and their results may be surprising. An example of the creativity of local governments is the support of participatory budgets submitted by local communities or the formation of teams that are responsible for the creative search for solutions affecting the development of the region. In the studies of the Central Statistical Office, we can find data that prove that for several years participatory budgets, or in other words, participatory budgets, have been very popular in local and regional development.

The Supreme Audit Office indicates that in 2018, as many as 170 cities in Polish created participatory budgets (Figure 6 and 7) and the amount of participatory budgets ranged from PLN 3950 to PLN 89,772.



**Figure 6.** Number of participatory budgets in Poland.

Adapted from: GUS <https://stat.gov.pl/>



**Figure 7.** Number of cities and the amount of participatory budgets in Poland in 2018 by voivodship.

Adapted from: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/budzety-partycypacyjne.html>

Another innovative activity of local authorities is the adoption of strategic management from the private sector – organization and adapting it to the conditions and needs of public institutions. Long-term development and economic growth would not be possible if it were not for planning and making investments in a given administrative area, by means of which pro-development activities are implemented.

The basic tools of strategic management in local government include: development strategy, investment and financial plans, as well as spatial development studies and plans. In the process of formulating them, the following questions should be answered: what should be done and where? What are the costs associated with the implementation of individual tasks? How long does it take to achieve your goals? Which entities will be responsible for the implementation of these tasks? What sources of funding will be responsible for the planned tasks? Are there any obstacles or limitations to these tasks?



The process of strategic management of a given territorial unit can be divided into two stages: the first stage, strategic planning, i.e. planning the development strategy, planning activities implemented in the form of programmes and plans, e.g. long-term investment and financial plans, and the second stage, controlling the implementation of strategic arrangements, consisting in checking the degree of achievement of the set goals, as well as monitoring the course of these processes. The analysis of the literature on the subject proves that the basic and most frequently used financial and infrastructural instruments used to support and implement local development are: development strategies, spatial development planning, issuing location decisions and permits for the use of environmental resources and introducing changes in it. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the activity of local governments – hosts, as investors in their area (Szewczuk, 2015, p. 32). This growth was mainly observed in the sphere of public utilities. In addition to the budget amounts allocated to salaries for the administration and the operation of local administrative institutions (schools, kindergartens, hospitals, nursing homes), there was an increase in investment expenditure to 35% of the total budgets of municipalities. These investments make it possible to increase the commune's budget in the future, and in turn this budget has a significant impact on the quality of life of residents. When making decisions about planned and accepted investments, local authorities are guided by the fact that they affect the development and competitiveness of the company and are consistent with the adopted development strategy and the strategic objectives contained therein. Local government pursues the goals of the local community, the state and fulfils the functions assigned to it by law to enable the development of society (Mańka-Szulik, 2015, p. 170). It plays the most important role in territorial units, to which the state entrusts its interests at the local level. The tasks of local government are characterized by their public nature and the fact that they serve to meet the collective needs of the inhabitants of a given local government community (Grycuk, Russel 2014, p. 71).

### **3. Avatar as a modern tool for marketing communication and supporting strategic management processes in local government units**

#### **The idea of the avatar tool. Test Results**

The idea of creating the Avatar tool appeared at the time of defining the needs of local government customers. As part of the development of the solution concept, based on the available literature, the problems occurring in the process of customer service in the management of public services were defined. As J. Trischler and D. Scott point out, the process of public service management focuses on meeting the following requirements (Trischler, Scott, 2018, p. 201):

- customer orientation, which ultimately evaluates the quality of the service provided,
- continuous improvement, deepening of knowledge, innovation in solving problems, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the organization's employees,
- development and commitment of employees, which is related to an organizational culture based on trust and the transfer of full competences to employees,
- management based on processes and facts, based on the effective use of resources, obtaining the desired results, managing information that should be true, complete, reliable, professional,
- leadership and consistency of objectives. Leaders at all levels of a public organization are responsible for its development, the promotion of its values, its mission and vision,
- development of partnerships. Mutually beneficial relations between partners result in full integration in both knowledge creation, implementation of plans and public objectives, applying generally accepted rules of conduct,
- public responsibility, ethical approach and conduct of employees, meeting the expectations of customers, employers, society,
- results-oriented, where excellence depends on the ability to balance and satisfy the interests of groups, individuals who are responsible for the functioning of a public organization.

The customer service process is a number of interrelated activities that determine the level of customer satisfaction when purchasing a product (service), which is the last step in the process that usually begins with the order and ends with the delivery of the product to the customer (Turban et al., 2018, p. 102).

The psychological aspect plays an important role in the process of customer service, especially among the elderly. It is worth emphasizing that psychological needs are an area that for the vast majority of customer service employees in local government units is a completely unconscious area, and paradoxically – the most important one (Bartels, Turnbull, 2020, p. 1321). Therefore, it becomes necessary to use methods to support customer service employees in the most challenging situations by seeking answers to several questions:

1. As a result, there are misunderstandings, difficult, often conflictual situations in contacts with customers.
2. Why the client is still dissatisfied with the service despite meeting their substantive needs.
3. Why the accepted arguments do not have the desired effect and what are the motives of the clients.

The activities described above constituted preparatory activities for conducting pilot surveys in 2020, which resulted from the implementation of an international research and scientific project entitled Innovative model of assistance avatar of a caregiver for the elderly, co-financed by the EU (Maśloch, 2023, p. 103).

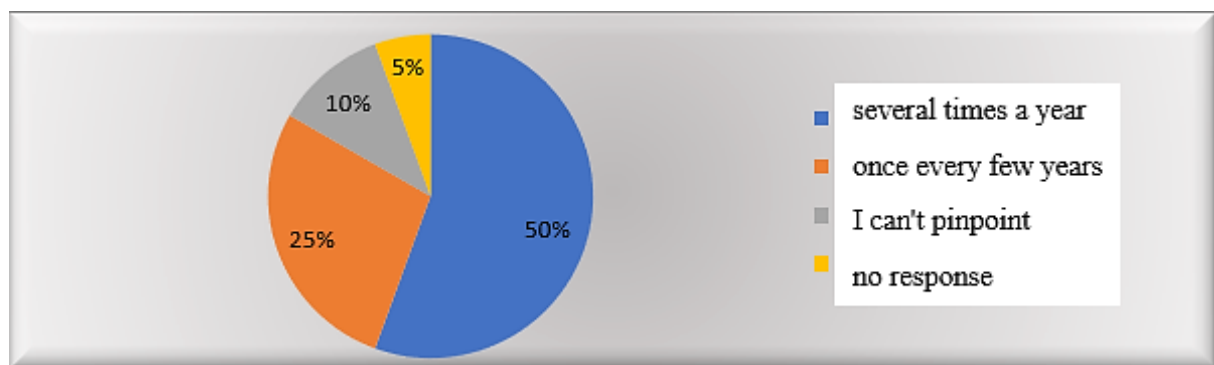
The questionnaire consisted of a main section of 23 questions and a meter of 4 questions. The main issues raised in the survey concerned two main research areas:

1. Firstly, devoted to the assessment of respondents in the field of functioning and service of petitioners (clients) in public administration offices.
2. The second one, which focuses on the expectations and requirements of petitioners (clients) in terms of service in public administration offices.

The aim of the research was to verify the correctness (elimination of defects) of the adopted research procedure, the appropriate selection of people and the use of research tools (questionnaires). This study was not used to verify hypotheses, its purpose was to provide information enabling the construction of a prototype of the avatar tool with the widest possible functionalities, which were determined after the analysis of the information obtained as a result of the empirical study.

The study was qualitative (questionnaire test) and was conducted in the form of a meeting of people from a deliberately selected sample with the number  $N = 40$ . The pilot study was carried out using the conventional method (verification, m.in, whether the respondents correctly understand all the questions asked, whether the instructions attached to the questionnaire are understandable, whether the questionnaire contains a complete set of answers), supplemented with a cognitive demonstration (suggestions for changes/supplementation of the scope and type of questions, analysis of the respondents' target group).

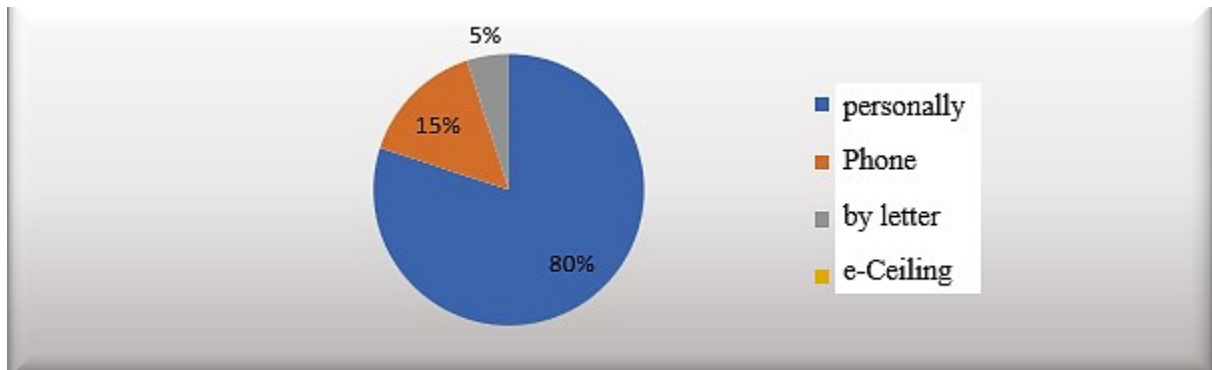
The statistical analysis showed that all participants of the study used the services of public administration offices, but most of them (85%) used the services of the city or municipality, while the rest - the services of the County Office. In the course of the survey, it turned out that in most cases the respondents deal with official matters once a year (50%) or once every few years (25%), 10% of the respondents could not precisely determine the frequency of visits to the office, and 5% of the respondents did not give any answer (the above data is presented in Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Structure of the answer to the question: How often do you deal with official matters in local government units?

Source: In-house analysis based on empirical research.

In the next part of the study, participants were asked about how they most often contact from local government units – two answers could be selected in the survey. Respondents indicated that they most often contact in person (80%), by phone (15%) and by letter (5%). There were no indications regarding electronic contact via the e-PUAP platform. The structure of the answer to this question is shown in Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** Structure of the answer to the question about how to handle matters in local government units. Source: In-house analysis based on empirical research.

It should be emphasized that this publication presents only a general introduction to the subject of the research and indicates the structure of the answers to the two most important questions from the point of view of the topic of the article.

The conceptual avatar devices were installed for testing in November 2020 in Przysucha and Sulejówek. The purpose of the 6-month testing program was to identify major changes in the software and the scope of the avatar's handling of affairs compared to its original version. On the basis of the analysis of matters handled by the petitioners, on the basis of continuous interviews with avatar users and the analysis of the device's information sets, the most important conclusions resulting from the implementation of the avatar device should be indicated:

1. reference to the quality of customer service (customers),
2. analysing the number and types of cases handled by obtaining electronic feedback,
3. increasing the safety of residents through the possibility of electronic handling of an increasing number of matters,
4. efficient and fast transfer of information to clients,
5. in verifying and controlling the status of official matters,
6. availability, unlimited time,
7. the possibility of using digital data obtained by the Avatar tool for use in the strategic management processes of local government units.

## 4. Summary

The empirical research and the concept of the avatar presented in the publication, the implementation of further research and development works, the preparation and testing of prototypes and the development of the final version of the tool are carried out as part of the project financed by the European Union entitled Innovative model of assistance for the caregiver of the elderly, contract number: POWR.04.03.00-IP.07-00-006/18, coordinated by the War Studies University, in partnership with the Częstochowa University of Technology, Przysucha District, Sulejówek City Hall and a foreign partner, Education & Information Technology from Cyprus.

According to the analyses presented in the first part of the publication, traditional forms of marketing communication are not and will certainly not fulfill the role attributed to them in the literature. As mentioned earlier, social media and the Internet dominate among young people. In the absence of the possibility of developing traditional forms of communication, an avatar tool was designed, which is a combination of a digital form of communication with elements of interaction with the customer (client), interaction in the form of e.g. the ability to talk to a virtual person. It should also be emphasized that the avatar device has been subjected to a number of tests aimed at analysing its capabilities, introducing modifications in the scope of the implemented cases and assessing the interest in the device by the petitioners.

As mentioned earlier, based on the research and analyses conducted, the avatar device works well in communication between the applicant and the office and is a valuable source of information used in the strategic management of local government units. After the completion of the project and the introduction of modifications resulting from the adaptation of the device's software to the needs of specific institutions, it should be assumed that this solution will be recommended as a completely new, innovative marketing communication channel.

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