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### **Product Category Management Issues**

Key words: product, category, management, merchandising

*The purpose of the paper is to present the issues related to category management.*

*It includes the overview of category management definitions and the correct process of exercising it. Moreover, attention is paid to the advantages of brand management, the benefits the supplier and retailer may obtain in this way. The risk element related to this topics is also presented herein.*

#### **Introduction**

The world evolves and along change people, communities, markets, consumers and their behaviors. The only thing we are sure to expect is the continuous change in the world surrounding us. Frequently in marketing theory numerous theses and practices become obsolete or out of fashion. The changes going on in the reality surrounding us concern all the fields of our everyday life. Both global and domestic commerce are subject to transformations. The changes in consumer preferences become more and more conspicuous, the consumers attracted by advertisements and promotions want to get more and more goods in a short time and what they desire must be new and trendy. The technological progress is very fast and what is a novelty today will become standard within one month. The market is more and more competitive, which causes that trading organizations must look for new solutions in order to obtain competitive advantage, which can be assured by one of the latest state-of-the-art concepts – category management processes.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Category management origins**

The idea of category management, for the first time appeared in West Europe and the USA in turn of 1980's and 1990's<sup>2</sup>. The main authors and promoters of the idea were the Grocery Manufacturers of America. Category management is also one of the basic tasks of the ECR (Efficient Consumer Response), associating FMCG manufacturers and retailers.

Category management enables the determination of the way the consumer perceives a given category, what kind of criteria they use in their selection, e.g. price, brand, taste, what is most important to them. Basing on the data from the category management project we may also understand what kind of goods are most frequently bought and should be put on the shelves<sup>3</sup>.

Category management has highly evolved throughout recent years. The key change concerns the fact that the starting point in the process aimed at the growth of sales of a category refers to consumer needs and their satisfaction while doing shopping. More and more retail networks and suppliers realize that Category Management seems to be the technique giving the greatest sales growth potential among today's business management processes.<sup>4</sup>

### **Overview of category management terms**

In the literature on the topic we may find various definitions of this notion. For the purposes of this paper the most frequent ones shall be cited. J. Bogusz and J. Dzierzbicka think that this is a measure consisting in the identification of category, improvement of its sales and treating it as an independent business unit. In other words this is product category management in a store, together with the retailers, for permanent improvement of a category results<sup>5</sup>.

The purpose of category management also is product category management, to achieve as high sales as possible, bringing possibly the highest profits and meeting consumer needs. This purpose is achieved thanks to the combined actions out of numerous fields: marketing, production, logistics, shelf management, price policy<sup>6</sup>.

Category management cannot be analyzed in separation from trade marketing, the one it undoubtedly originates from. According to A. Kłosowicz category management is an area combining marketing and sales. Slightly generalizing we may say that this is an optimization process of the demand side in the sales process. The most conspicuous part of it is the shelf work in a store, therefore numerous people associate category management with display and merchandising. However, it constitutes the optimization of four major elements: product range, promotion, price and shelf (merchandising). The standard marketing approach is

gradually abandoned, which means thinking in terms of categories and consumer needs and expectations, instead of thinking in terms of brands.. CM is a kind of bridge linking sales and marketing – based on category instead of brand<sup>7</sup>.

### **Merchandising and its principles**

As already mentioned, merchandising, i.e. a set of methods of effective product exhibition, is inseparably bound with category management. The position of a product on the shelf, the way of setting it, or small visual information, appeared to have a significant effect on the sales, competition or even brand awareness.<sup>8</sup>

Today's merchandising is an advanced knowledge consisting of several action techniques. The basic ones include: the method of display, i.e. so-called facing, planogram, block), stock (on shelves and total), pricing, hardware, communication (POSM/POP), expansion (cross category placement/promotions)<sup>9</sup>.

Along with the growing control of manufacturers over the display in traditional commerce, the latter gradually lost its significance. However, the sales in modern sales channels grew, mainly in large retail networks. The networks in turn started to operate not only as traders, but also launching their own brands, they started to use state-of-the –art merchandising knowledge to promote the brands in their stores. However, the networks could not use the art of merchandising in its full range, because while running sales of a great range of products, they had no appropriate knowledge on all their products, the knowledge held by manufacturers only. So a certain agreement occurred between the network and the manufacturer in the scope of category management.

Both merchandising and CM are among the basic forms of cooperation of marketing and sales departments. The purpose of the common efforts is in this case the stimulation of consumer shopping. After a few years it appeared that the intensive trading actions affect the brand condition in various ways. The experiences showed that retail surely was not only the place of commercial transactions and surely represents an important link in the marketing strategy of a company. The former commercial department of a company was to supply the product to the point of sale. At present it also performs a tactic marketing target, i.e. purchase stimulation or even the task to create the brand's image<sup>10</sup>.

The key stakeholders in category management are also worth mentioning here. These are manufacturers and suppliers. They also have both convergent and divergent targets in relation to the market actions. The manufacturers want the best placement of their products on the shelves, while the retailers want to display their own brands there; the manufacturers want to reduce the number of the competitors' products, while the networks is afraid to lose customers with a reduced product range. The manufacturers also want as much shelf space for their products as possible, while the networks wish to maintain a minimum stock. So it is necessary that both parties – the supplier and the retailer, cooperate on the appropriate orientation of the consumer and encouraging him to buy as much as he can. The main difference in the approach of the manufacturers and networks to CM consists in the fact that the suppliers still “think” in terms of products, while the retailers – in terms of shelves. The manufacturers have their Brand Management, Product Management and the product, while the networks

wish to maintain minimum stock and minimum labor expenditure<sup>11</sup>. The ultimate common target for both parties is to select appropriate product range for the consumers' needs and thus achieve the growth of sales and profits. It is important that the networks and manufacturers should focus on common targets instead of diverging elements<sup>12</sup>.

### **Category Management Process**

The CM process can be divided into a few sub-types, differing from one another with the cooperating parties' extent of progress and commitment and cooperation closeness. On such foundation we can specify four stages of CM development.

- traditional buying and selling with the key role of the sales person and her/his relationships with the manager; the Companies concentrate on the margin, price and turnover, disregarding consumer behaviors,
- CM development stage when pilot projects are carried out based on simple analyses and with the support of simple computer systems. Complete implementation is applied, however without the participation of any substantial processes,
- advanced CM process in which the result inspection, data collection and processing take place,
- the cooperation ideal recommended by CM theories, assuming the full integration of data collection and analysis, simulations and operational planning.

The starting point in the preparations for implementation of CM projects is the vision and mission of a network/store owner. Then the process should go on in a way reflecting the consumer point of view and should consist of eight stages, i.e:

- definition of categories
- role of categories
- assessment of categories
- measures of categories
- strategy of categories
- tactics of categories
- implementation<sup>13</sup>.

Analyzing more precisely the process components we should start with more precise category notion. These are distinct, manageable groups of products or services perceived by the consumers as correlated with one another and/or interchangeable in satisfying specific

needs<sup>14</sup>. Category is a homogeneous group of products, satisfying a given consumption need<sup>15</sup>.

Both the supplier and retailer identify at this stage the products forming a category from the buyer's point of view.

The next step is the definition of the category role, i.e. the meaning it consciously or subconsciously attributed to the category bought at a specific store. It also represents the role a retailer should attribute to a category, according to the basic target of the store, i.e. satisfying the consumers' needs.

In theory four roles the categories in a store may play for the consumers can be distinguished:

#### Destination Category that

- indicates the retailer's profile of specialization to the customers
- it is important for the retailer and the consumers
- frequently happens to be one of the „purposes” of the customers' visiting the store
- wide product range, characterized with a number of bargain promotion above average
- is on the central shelf of the rack, best on the height of one's eyes; is large and well served by the staff<sup>16</sup>

#### Preferred Category

- consists of products bought frequently and in large quantities,
- the retailer wants to be competitive in terms of its price,
- it is accompanied by intensive promotion campaigns and other measures,
- it is important for the retailer due to high product margins and turnover,
- covers a wide range of products,
- like the destination category, it occupies the central place in the shelf-rack<sup>17</sup>.

#### Convenience Category

- The target of the retailer is to provide appropriate product range so that the consumers do not have to do additional shopping elsewhere,
- The store offers minimum product range at average or high prices
- Basically these are categories of low significance for the consumer,
- It is characterized with high impulsiveness of shopping decisions,
- Such categories require less „work”, space on the shelves, promotion,

- This category is often placed near the tills<sup>18</sup>

#### Seasonal Category

- is seasonally important for the retailer and the consumers (it may generate triple turnover than in other seasons,
- always wide range of product during the season,
- it is placed in an attractive and recognizable for the consumer point of the store<sup>19</sup>.

Another step is to carry out the valuation of a category by means of the so-called decision tree. It refers to client attitudes and their method of making decisions about a purchase. It answers the questions about the consumer's expectations towards a category. What they find an issue while shopping. What kind of solutions they expect. How to satisfy consumer's needs in a best way.

At a further stage the role of product categories covered by the project are analyzed basing on market and consumer data. The same category may have one function in megastore and another in a discount store.

The data necessary for the category role selection are also necessary at the category assessment stage. The category assessment analysis results indicate the area in which a retailer has a good position and what elements should be improved. On such foundations we may determine the measures of a category, i.e. the measures of the extent of target achievement in a given project. The next and simultaneously the most important task is to define the marketing strategies for categories<sup>20</sup>.

Several types of strategies are applied:

- Traffic Building – focus on attracting buyers,
- Transaction Building – increasing the value of an average basket of goods bought at a store,
- Profit Generating – increasing the volume of sales of products with high margin (above average in a category),
- (Cash Generating – focus on improvement of cash flows through the product sales increase,
- Turf defending – aggressive placement of a category to defend market share against loss to competitors,
- Excitement Creating – the strategy is to create the awareness of a sudden demand or sense of a good bargain,
- Image Enhancing – supporting the store image in the purchaser's eyes through affecting the consumer by: price, range or service repairs<sup>21</sup>.

The category management process needs to be so introduced that it would regard four consumer demands: the reason for purchase, the product the consumer needs, finding the product easily and consumer experience. The customer's requirements may be recognized in the test results. During the observations and interviews the most important items of information are gathered in relation to the purchase decision making by the consumer, regarding the specific situation of shops and the influence of intra-store marketing factors on such decision (product range, price, bargains, merchandising standards)<sup>22</sup>.

Another stage is the implementation of strategy carried out by means of category tactics. We may differentiate product range tactics (what is placed on the shelves and what is withdrawn), merchandizing (display tactics – how to place products on the shelf), bargain promotion (promotion calendar) and price. After these are settled the goods can be placed on the shelves<sup>23</sup>.

The tactics are implemented along with the project implementation. At a store it is a complex process as each element must be agreed upon by all the project participants.

In case of product range selection we also talk about a tool for the product range optimization. The tool prompts the use of the *Pareto* curve indicating which products generate 80% turnover and which – the other 20%. The tool brings alternatives and options to be decided on whether it will be possible to maintain the existing level of sales with the restricted product range and market coverage in a specific category, reducing at the same time the logistic costs and gaining more space for higher rotation products bringing higher profits<sup>24</sup>.

The next immensely important element is to settle and arrange the point of sale. Considering the category display in the point of sale we should start with spatial planning, i.e. select the appropriate location in the store. The tests carried out proved that the direct contact with the product in the store is very important. The companies must decide then whether a stand should be put up or a shelf behind the counter or within a typical aisle. The modern form of sales, i.e. self-service dominated over the counter sales, the counter often being a barrier against purchase, because it restricts e.g. examination of a cosmetic, forces to standing in a queue and asking the sales person about the price<sup>25</sup>.

The rack and shelf are another step in category arrangement. Shelf optimization, in addition to the product range optimization, is one of the three main pillars of shelf category management. The shelf is a place where three most important stakeholders, in terms of trade, meet: the manufacturer who produced the product, the retailer who owns the shelf and the whole store and the consumer who is to buy the product from the shelf. Thus, it is very important for each shelf to have appropriate display, appropriate number of products placed on the shelf and at appropriate prices. Upon fixing the elements, the store staff and logistics need to be adapted. Using modern tools one may settle the data on sales volume, which enables the selection of appropriate number of products on the shelf and the method of displaying them.

While planning the category layout on the shelf, one needs to consider the consumer preferences, including the product layout and the selection method (by brand, function, package size, color). The brand display facilitates finding of a product or series searched for, plays an educating-informatory role, giving a sense of order and tidiness on the shelf, at the same time being smart and clear. It enables one to become familiar with all the products in a series, which largely enhances the purchase of cosmetics going beyond the basic needs. The share of specific brands on the shelf should reflect their shares in the network and/or market

sales. Planning the layout of a shelf-rack we should also consider price segmentation, according to which more expensive brands should be placed on higher shelves, which those generating the highest turnover should be on the height on one's eyes. The brands at the lowest prices should be on the bottom shelves, but usually, due to the high rotation, they should be appropriately displayed. The prices also go down from the left to the right side of the shelf rack, when the customer faces the shelves, however, it is also important which side he/she enters an aisle from and how the store traffic is structured<sup>26</sup>.

Another effective principle of product placement on the shelf is blocking brands. An exception may be specific subcategories requiring separate communication and shelf rack marking. Disregarding the size of a store, appropriately selected product range and display, their logical layout on the shelves and method of customer service are of substantial importance for attracting the customers and thus for the level of sales<sup>27</sup>.

Any product range layout that is not well matched to the needs and expectations may affect the purchaser who would feel lost in front of the shelf, not finding the product they search for. This is when they most frequently would choose to go to another store, it most often happens in case of categories characterized by high consumer loyalty<sup>28</sup>.

Talking about the use of store space we should mention an important element supporting product range management, i.e. about the forms of promotion, particularly the role of POS (Points of sales)<sup>29</sup>.

POS frequently generate impulse shopping and placed near tills or heavy customer traffic points play a role of a silent sales person<sup>30</sup>. However, if they are to bring profits in the point of sale, a few conditions need to be met:

- POS must stand in the store, not in the back-room, which often happens in smaller shops
- The display material should be well designed, i.e. it should be of appropriate, not too large, size, considering the shop capacity and should have appropriately substantial goods coverage,
- The products should not be arranged too perfectly – this discourages the consumer from reaching for the product and „spoiling“ the display,
- the POS should be updated, undamaged and esthetic,
- the POS's should stand in a visible place, correlated with the adjacent categories,
- the POS should be legible and clear for the consumer<sup>31</sup>.

The final stage of the project is its implementation and project evaluations and next the summary of the measures taken so far. Usually the sales value of the corresponding period prior to the project is compared to that of the sales after the implementation of the product



range changes assumed in the project and after the period such changes could make the shelf really „work”, through the new refreshed image of the shelf. It is significant to make the comparison in adequate periods. Due to seasonal trends, one cannot compare the sales of deodorants in June-August to the period of October - December<sup>32</sup>.

The summary of the measures is the stage enabling us to verify the current point-of-purchase strategy<sup>33</sup>, or category development strategy and adapt them to the ongoing dynamics of the changing market conditions, mainly the number of new products, segments or even manufacturers in a category<sup>34</sup>.

We should also remember that in order to carry out the category management project correctly one needs to base on trustworthy and reliably made market surveys and available market data<sup>35</sup>. The market data answer the questions: what is a category on a market, what is a retailer's share in a specific category on the market, in a specific distribution channel and whether it has a growing or dropping tendency. Moreover, they are to verify the effects of the projects carried out. partly they may originate from the network's or manufacturer's own information<sup>36</sup>. The surveying companies also provide specialist tools. For example, in case of ACNielsen and MEMRB the data are based on the surveys in points of sale, while GfK Polonia offers data from household panel<sup>37</sup>.

The consumer surveys also are to define a given category and reconstruct the segments creating such category. Usually, the manufacturers know themselves how their category is defined, i.e. what products create a category and what consumer benefits such category offers. They also know what segments create such category. In the CM process the perception of consumers being the users of such category is the key element. The way they perceive a product category and behave towards it at a store decides on the fact how a shelf should be constructed in an optimal way<sup>38</sup>.

The surveys carried out for the CM project purposes include:

- category position analysis. It provides the basic information on a given product category in a network: purchase frequency, size and value falling on an average act of purchase, the use of purchaser potential or covering the purchasers' needs.
- store portfolio analysis that provides information on the type of stores the purchasers of a given network do their shopping<sup>39</sup>.

This stage must not be omitted in the CM process, most of all because the role of the specific categories in the consumers' lives happens to be variable, which may cause a change in consumer behaviors.

### **Advantages related to category management implementation**

We cannot disagree that category management brings measurable results. The measurable elements include a situation when, for example, the sales of a specific category in a specific network or store grow, although the sales on the market are of a dropping tendency. Category management, in addition to influencing the growth of consumer expenses on a selected product category may affect market penetration<sup>40</sup>.

Another significant meter is the profitability of a category calculated through dividing the product stock value by the value of margin generated. Considering that the Polish market becomes more and more stable and mature and the growth of revenues to a dropping extent depends on the number of new stores and more and more on the efficiency of actions, it is the category management the companies should find growth opportunities at<sup>41</sup>.

Through the recent years category management largely developed and the processed carried out properly provided the points so far missing, that category management may significantly contribute to the growth of sales for numerous categories and help build competitive advantage<sup>42</sup>.

The other benefits obtained after a CM project implementation include the potential growth by 5-12% in quantity and value<sup>43</sup> of the sales of the category such project referred to. However the figures are different and depend on numerous factors and category specifics – e.g. in the category of teas the growth may be even by 16-50% in value, while in WC liquids just by 5-15%<sup>44</sup>.

The benefits are gained by the retailers who find out through consumer surveys how the consumer sees a category, moreover the analyses show how important from the turnover point of view is a category in a store and comparing it to other categories, they receive free of charge and permanently analyses from suppliers concerning the category in the networks, the trends and sales dynamics of suppliers, brands or products. Then all the analyses provided by the supplier cause that the retailer may devote more time for substantial action, instead of employing a sales analyst. The supplier together with the retailer prepare a SWOT<sup>45</sup> analysis for the specific category, thanks to which the merchandiser knows the weak and strong points of such category, knows what he should improve and what can be unchanged. Moreover, a trustworthy retailer's partner helps the merchandiser develop category strategies and select optimum tactics. Furthermore, through the optimization of the product range the top class market product are placed on the store shelf, i.e. the appropriate range of the products offered<sup>46</sup>, while the low-rotation products are removed. The product range optimization also enables the minimization of the stock on the shelf, this way reducing the cost of inventories

and logistics. The products included in the range are those the consumer seeks. The well selected product range shall cause the growth of consumer's expenses in a category. Additionally, through the efficiency analysis of the former promotions and common building of the promotion plan, the retailer knows when and how to promote the products and through the merchandising tactics, the shelf arranged by the supplier in the retail network is arranged in a logical way, from the consumer point of view<sup>47</sup>.

Obviously, the suppliers also benefit from category management. They share with the retailers the consumer surveys prepared specially for the category management process, thus acquiring the name of a very professional trading partner. Thanks to data exchange, they may find out what the sales of other competitive brand product sales are like in a specific retail network, through the product range tactics, they may influence the number of their products available in a network range. Moreover, through the common preparation of a promotion plan, they may place their brands in the best promotion period, which enables their sales increase and plan the production and sales in a better way. Thanks to the building of the shelf visualization, the manufacturer may manage the products of his own brands in the appropriate price segment, appropriate competitor surroundings, or the most conspicuous places on the shelf or in the store and conducting the project in a specific network, impedes conducting of the same process by another supplier who could do it in a dishonest way. However, the key advantage for the supplier is the regular improvement of his trading relationships between the sales and purchase departments<sup>48</sup>.

Among the numerous factors that influence and decide on the success of the CM project<sup>49</sup> the appropriate definition of a category, determination of the strategic role of category in the perspective of the retailer's activity, a thoroughly prepared and structured long-term category development strategy, collection of data on the market and consumers, appropriately selected data to be analyzed (representative for a store), definition of category efficiency, category planning based on its role and anticipated development directions, setting the principles and implementations planned, creating the work schedule and monitoring the project performance, establishing teams working on the project and budget based on the strategy, defining consumer and business targets that must be ambitious, but also performable and fixing the dates for the efficiency valuation and measuring tools<sup>50</sup>.

One should remember that the most important factor is the mutual trust of the trading partners, both the supplier and the retailer must be appropriately committed in the project, on both sides of the project there must be a decision maker, the determination and consistency in tending to the project performance are also important

as well as the regular data exchange and communication between the parties to the project and whatever was approved of on the retail network headquarters level must be in 100% observed in every store.

It is very important that the trading partners do not hide their weaknesses and are prepared for partial failures happening within the project, because this might bring about unnecessary disputes<sup>51</sup>.

### **Risks for the supplier and the retailer**

In addition to the benefits certain risk may naturally occur. In case of the supplier this may be a situation in which a dishonest retailer would take advantage of the supplier and make him provide appropriate data on the market and consumer, then he may make decisions indisputably or for the benefit of his own margin only, he may impede the cooperation or in an extreme case, he may resign from the cooperation. Another risk is an incident where upon the common analysis of the market the retailer would find he does not need help in the project follow-up or upon introducing the pilot project, the retailer would break up the cooperation and would pass the project to another supplier<sup>52</sup>.

The retailer may also encounter certain risk. This may be a dishonest supplier who only wants to obtain sales data concerning his and competitors' products from the retailer and the retailer's future plans. Then the supplier's lack of competence that might bring about the drop of turnover and profit or the supplier's focus on his own brands only or the lack of the supplier's professional software, no work schedule or unskillfully determined targets for the category might bring about the deterioration of the relationships between the retailer and the supplier.

### **Summary**

The changes occurring within the distribution channels on the quickly saleable goods market demand from their participants totally new concepts related both to the management in marketing and to the cooperation between the manufacturer and the retailer. The changes taking place in the consumer behaviors cause that satisfying consumer needs becomes the priority target in the organization.

In the traditional approach to sales we encounter two negotiators. The retailer's representative wants to obtain as much turnover and profit for the retail network as possible. The supplier's representative, in turn, must negotiate the appropriate sale and resale conditions at the lowest cost possible. The category management projects guide the cooperation onto a totally new level of relationships between the trading partners. Obviously they have an immense impact on the improvement of such relationships and can significantly facilitate the work, not only through their impact on the final target of both parties, i.e. the sales, but, for example by providing the necessary, often unique market knowledge i.e. category knowledge, necessary for making the right business decisions. The CM project success demands from both participants discipline concerning the terms, analysis quality and not omitting the significant stages in the process. Finally it requires the change of the way of partner perception through the willing of mutual cooperation, setting difficult tasks for numerous enterprises, a very reasonable selection of the trading partner by the supplier is recommended, which guarantees the project performance until the end. Thus, category management represents a great opportunity in acquisition of competitive advantage of the suppliers and retailers applying it.

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