EMPIRICAL STUDY ON DISTRIBUTION-CENTRIC MARKETING AND OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES OF FMCG IN RURAL MARKETS

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Abstract
FMCG are distributed using distribution structures that rely on daily work of distributor who are involved in controlling product movement, distribution coverage of retailers, logistics and promotion. Rural markets work with the dynamics of distance, low density of population, and low infrastructure levels since all factors impact the effectiveness of marketing based on distribution. This paper analyzes the marketing and operational issues experienced by FMCG distributors in rural areas of Salem District due to their experience since it dictates the success of products in penetrating the interior markets. The study collected primary data among 193 distributors were subjected to a structured interview schedule to gather personal interaction as this accurately reflects the realities in the field. The research design is empirical due to the relationship between the logistics, credit practice, timing of delivery, expectations of the retailers and marketing support at the company level which are seen to be intertwined. The statistical tools of factor analysis, discriminant analysis and Conjoint analysis is used to determine the relative importance of important distribution features since distributors give the various characteristic attributes of delivery consistency. The findings indicate that the concerns distributors have are reliability and speed since rural retailers rely on the supply of products when needed. The operational problems come into picture when the distributors experience transportation delays, increasing cost, scarcity of manpower and lack of promotional backing.

Keywords: *Rural Distribution, FMCG Marketing, Operational Challenges, Distributor Behaviour and Supply Chain Efficiency*

Research Background

The rural markets influence the development of fast-moving consumer goods industry since consumption levels are accumulating in the interior regions as income, movement and communication continues to increase. The reliance of distributors helps companies link up rural shops with basic items since the physical distance and the distribution arrangements do not allow companies to close in. Rural markets imply different behavioural, cultural and logistical patterns due to low prices, accessibility and trust being the main values which are embraced by customers than branding and promotions. Retailers run small stores that have little storage capacity since needs per village are different and rely on events that are local, seasonal and crops. These variations incur a need to respond by distribution networks due to the fact that timely replenishment will avoid stock-outs and enhance retailer confidence. The long-term relationships are applied in rural markets due to the establishment of stability in transactions based on individual acquaintance. The reason why FMCG businesses formulate schemes and bonuses is to enhance market penetration since, in the rural areas, there is a massive untapped potential which relies on effective distribution backup.

The distributors are the foundations of rural FMCG transit since they provide a bridge between the company warehouses and the inner points of retail outlets. The activities that each distributor undertakes include gathering of orders, movements of products, issuing credit and coordination of the retailers as these activities keep the goods running within the rural shops. The distributors serve the same terrain in different village clumps since road conditions and distance vary extremely within a district such as Salem. They are operating on time-constrained time-window since the rural stores invite customers throughout their mornings as well as during afternoon and evenings. The distributors are absorbing transportation expenses, taking care of the returns and arranging delivery routes due to the geographical area in rural locations which adds fuel costs and time waste. Their communication with sales personnel and marketing units defines scheme implementation since the promotion of the company does not reach the rural retailers unless distributed by a distributor. The distributors play a role in influencing the availability of brands since the availability of a product in every village depends on how the distributors would stock it. The paper discusses their role since distributors and suppliers' operational issues have a direct impact on the performance of the FMCG firms in rural market.

The rural distribution works within limitation determined by the infrastructure, uncertainty in demand and low manpower due to the small margins distributed and high delivery obligation by the distributors. Connection of roads in places within the interior villages is inconsistent on the basis that the small roads could be in poor condition or the weather conditions. Transport delays, the delays arise when vehicles pass through discontinuous paths as a result of long routes taking longer to travel upon. There is great variability in the demand of retailers since the rural incomes are determined by the agricultural seasons and weekly wage changes. Retailers are given credit by the distributors since it is not always that the rural stores have acceptance of inventory without any credit support. The credit cycles would extend the delivery plans as the distributors have to match the collections with new orders. Lack of manpower has a negative impact on the level of consistency in delivery since the helpers and drivers change and move towards jobs that are better paying and seasonal. Marketing plans bring about pressure of work as the distributors have to clarify the deals to the retailers who prefer oral communication. The cost, speed and service are elements that the distributors in rural operations have to strike a balance on since each of them affects the satisfaction of the retailers.

Distribution-based marketing influences the FMCG performance of rural areas since the ability to reach the retailers is determined by how well the distributor and the company coordinate. Trade schemes, discounts and visibility programs are introduced by companies due to the fact that such measures promote product flow and make people buy more of them. Distributors are the main point of using these strategies since rural retailers rely on them to provide information and directions. Display unit, posters and product sample are the marketing materials which are only available in the villages through the space and effort of the distributors. The level of company support in different regions depends on the sales teams as they focus on competitive markets where a demand can be quickly resorted to. The complex schemes pressurize the distributors since the rural retailers like simple offers to cash flows cycles. Marketing interface also affects the trust since retailers can determine the reliability of a distributor by the clarity of the scheme and the reliability of supply of products. This interface is explored by the research since marketing on the rural area relies less on advertising and is more on field level interactions as they rely on distribution strength.

Salem District presents an appropriate community to learn about the problem of rural FMCG distribution since the area consists of a range of village clusters having different access to roads, markets, as well as agricultural earnings. Both the high potential and low density rural areas are served by distributors in Salem due to differences in the market characteristics both within and outside the district. The research has significance since the operation issues of these distributors mirror the precipitating problems that exist in most Indian rural markets. Salem has a stable growth in FMCG demand volume since the residents rely on packaged foods to sustain their daily meals. The growth of rural outreach by companies can be explained by the fact that the awareness and mobility determine new patterns of consumption. The context conveys the manner in which a distribution-centered marketing focuses on operational realities since every distributor is in a field situation due to the influence of local geography and expectations of retailers.

Review of Literature

Research on rural FMCG distribution indicate that distributors will be the major contact between the firms and the distant selling points in rural areas since the rural market would not be directly covered by corporate sales staff. According to researchers, rural retailers are sensitive to delivery on a timely basis since the availability of products influences the daily sales and customer loyalty. The previous studies of the authors of the article by Rajesh and Nandhini (2020) emphasise the point that the distribution routes become more complex in the distance due to the impact of the terrain, road quality and seasonal conditions on the travel time. Research also notes that the distributors strike a balance among various functions since they control stock, organize credit, receive requests and share promotional plans. According to research conducted by Mehta and Singh (2019), the rural shops depend on their distributors to provide them with their information about the product as retailers do not interact with official marketing rarely. These results indicate that there is a strong field management in the distribution structure since reliability determines the retail contentment in country areas.

Prior research explains that distribution efficiency in rural areas is influenced by logistics difficulties due to the lack of uniformity of the physical infrastructure in most of the districts. Researchers designate the transport delays as those delays that are caused by distributors going over the scattered villages as long routes increase the fuel cost and delivery time. Research done by Sharma and Bansal (2021) demonstrates that insufficient warehouse service and dispersed demand makes it unpredictable as sales fluctuate according to income cycles and other local activities. Even the previous studies show that the distributors experience challenges in keeping their stocks at the right level as the unpredictable order cycles decrease the accuracy of planning. They are also noted to create disruption in the delivery schedules as the manpower shortages create a scenario where the helpers and drivers will switch between seasonal jobs. Such studies highlight that logistic limitations influence the service quality due to the fact that rural delivery systems strongly rely on the capacity of distributors.

Studies indicate that marketing coordination affects sales in rural regions since the schemes and trade offers have to go to retailers via distributors. According to the research that Kapoor and Thomas (2020) conducted, rural retailers prefer to rely on oral explanation since most of them are incapable of grasping written promotional information. Work done before it also points out that complicated marketing plans lower the turnout since the retailers are attracted to straightforward plans that fit cash flow trends. Researchers emphasize that the distributors are taken as the focus of benefits elucidation as they are the credible provider of the information in rural market. Research also reveals that poor visibility material undermines such presence of a brand since it is in rural stores which use basic displays and do not represent corporate brands. The literature also backs the point that marketing support should be in line with the realities in the field since distributors are in a position to ascertain how effectively the schemes are translated to actual purchases.

Researchers also underline that credit practices affect the relations between the distributor and the retailers since rural shops are characterized by the small amount of working capital. A study by Verma and George (2019) demonstrates that credit rises extend the delivery schedule since the distributors need to synchronize the frequency of repayment and the order frequency. It is observed in studies that delayed collections influence liquidity of distributors since the continuous flow of products is observed to be based on the available capital. Previous research has pointed out that, businesses demand strict payment discipline among the distributors since credit risks have to be tamed within the supply chain. These results indicate that financial practices define stability of operations since cash flow defines the ability of a distributor to provide regular service.

Research Gap

The review has found strong support of infrastructure, logistics and marketing problems in the distribution of FMCG in rural areas, although there are still a number of gaps. The current literature dwells primarily on general rural marketing but does not isolate distribution centric behaviour due to the large number of researchers who are interested in consumer oriented views and not channel operations. There are few papers that give distributor issues empirical analysis in a specific district since most studies adhere to a wide regional or national sample. The earlier literature is not sufficient to identify the relationship between marketing coordination and logistical performance insofar these two domains are usually researched independently despite the fact that they affect one another in the rural markets. These areas of gap demonstrate that an empirical study is required that will test distribution-focused marketing and operation issues using sophisticated analysis tools in a narrow case like Salem District.

Statement of the Problem

Rural FMCG distribution is based on the performance of distributors of the companies on daily basis that governs the flow of products, the planning of its routes, credit facilities, communication with the retailers since the companies do not have direct control over the majority of the rural markets. The rural geography makes the distributors subject to many inequalities in terms of road conditions, spreads in retail points, fluctuation in demand and added complexities in delivery costs due to uncertainty in planning and execution. The companies want strict adherence to schemes and stocking norms since brand presence is dependent on the implementation of schemes and stocking in the field. Promotional help can be given intermittently and this is problematic to the distributors since rural retailers are only being given verbal information on how to interpret the promotional offers. The operational issues are further escalated when the distributors experience manpower crises, credit delays or a reduction in the company coordination since all these factors influence the reliability of services. All retailers screen distributors on factors like availability, speedy delivery and scheme transparency since they determine the purchasing behaviour. The issue arises when distributors strive to reconcile company demands and rural market conditions since breakdown in alignment of strategy and field conditions decrease the efficiency of distribution. Few empirical researches investigate these issues using systematic ways of analysis as most studies are based on consumer behaviour as opposed to distribution dynamics. This leaves a definite need to explore the marketing and operation limitations of FMCG distributors in Salem District rural markets since the insight into these constraints helps to plan better and better channel performance in rural areas.

Research Questions

✦ What are the practices of the FMCG distributors in terms of distribution centered marketing in the rural Salem District market?
✦ Which functional issues affect the effectiveness and safety of FMCGs distribution in the rural regions?
✦ What is the top distribution attributes that distributors are concerned with when conducting business in rural FMCG outlets?

Need for the Study

The distribution of the FMCGs through the rural markets is subject to the performances of the distributors who coordinate the flow of the products, scheme communication, credit cycles and daily sets with the rural retailers since companies do not directly operate with the field control in most of the interior areas. The rural markets have their own special problems that are determined by the sporadic locations of retailing, fluctuating demand, transportation constraints and operations with low margins owing to the fact that the geography and income level affect purchasing behaviour. The distributors need to match the company expectations with the realities in the rural market due to the fact that the schedule on delivery schedules, implementations of the scheme and availability of stock require decisions which they make. Distributors provide rural retailers with access to timely supply and clear promotional direction since such retailers are limited in resources and publicity to little marketing. The weak distributor performance limits the growth in the company when the product demand is there, so accurate knowledge of the distribution issues is required. The available literature does not often study issues that center on distribution through empirical analytical instruments since most of the studies pay more attention to rural consumers but not channel operators. Such specialization within a given section of Salem District is needed since the area consists of different rural areas that have different infrastructure and consumption habits that predetermine the efficiency of distribution. The research solves the practicality need to know the role of marketing roles, operational limitations and distribution characteristics on the efficiency of FMCG channels in rural markets.

Objectives of the Study

✦ To examine the distribution-oriented marketing activities by distributors of FMCGs in Rural Agricultural areas of Salem District.
✦ To investigate the issues and challenges of operation those affect the level of efficiency as well as reliability of FMCG distribution in the rural markets.
✦ To determine the most important distribution attributes of FMCG distributors that could be used in serving rural retail networks.

Research Methodology

The research design applied is empirical research design as first hand information that builds direct evidence on the basis of FMCG distributors offers a clear understanding of the distribution-focused marketing and operational issues in the rural markets. The research is based on primary data since data available on the field capture the actual realities in which the distributors operate. The reason why a structured interview schedule was employed relates to the preference of distributors to nomination type of questioning where they are expected to share their experiences and do not need to express them extensively in writing. The tool also covers the topics of product circulation, reach of retailers, logistics obstacles, marketing assistance, credit practice and supply chain restraint since these aspects affect the rate of distribution of rural FMCGs. The population will include the distributors of the FMCG product that will deliver the goods to rural areas in the Salem District as this group will be the focal point in the connection between manufacturers and rural stores. The study used Cochran sample size formula where calculation gave a minimum requirement value of about 176 and the size was adjusted to 193 since larger sample size reinforces both factor-based and discriminant-based multivariate procedures. The simple random sampling is used as sampling technique since every qualifying distributor must have an equal probability of selection free of systematic selection bias. The employed subtype is lottery method since the distributors will be located in fragmented rural areas and random draw will be used to ensure fairness in picking up respondents in various groups of the district. The researcher uses the factor analysis approach since the grouping of underlying variables assists in determination of core dimensions contributing to distribution centred marketing behaviour.

The discriminant analysis is used because it distinguishes the distributors with regards to their efficiency of operation and marketing activity. Conjoint analysis is enclosed as the approach determines which of the distribution attributes, including the timing of delivery, promotional support, pricing flexibility or credit terms are the most weightable in the distribution decision making of the distributor.

Analysis of Data

The data analysis studies the role of distribution-centric marketing and operational issues on the FMCG flows in rural markets since each analytical tool bares different facet of the distributor behaviour. The study uses the factor analysis to determine the underlying dimensions which indicate the performance of the distribution since numerous variables interact with each other throughout the field operations. The discriminant analysis categorises distributors according to their efficiency and involvement in marketing since the differences in operations determine the level of service to the rural areas. Conjoint analysis is used to quantify the relative value of distribution attribute since distributors rank certain attributes that help them in their day-to-day activities. A combination of these methods of analysis gives the forces and inclinations influencing the FMCG distribution in rural Salem District.

Table 1 Factor Analysis: Key Dimensions Influencing FMCG Rural Distribution

Factor	Variables Loaded	Factor Loading Range	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)
Factor 1: Delivery Efficiency	Delivery punctuality, route planning clarity, stock availability	0.654–0.812	3.47	23.1
Factor 2: Marketing Support	Scheme clarity, retailer communication, visibility material supply	0.601–0.784	2.18	14.5
Factor 3: Financial Control	Credit cycle stability, repayment discipline, margin satisfaction	0.578–0.762	1.63	10.9
Factor 4: Logistical Stability	Transport adequacy, manpower availability, cost control	0.566–0.731	1.41	9.4

Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) = 0.821; Bartlett's Test $p < 0.001$

The four significant dimensions are determined by the factor analysis due to the reliance of the FMCG distribution process in rural markets on multi-dimensional interrelated operational and marketing processes. Achievement of efficiency in terms of delivery is the most powerful factor since the availability of the stock and on-time delivery defines the degree to which rural retailers can rely on the delivery of products. The second factor is marketing support as the rural retailers rely on a set of simple and transparent schemes that need a constant communication between the distributor and the retailer. The issue of financial control is a different factor since the cycle of credit, the coherence of repayment and the clarity of margin determine the liquidity of distributors and also determine the frequency of delivery. The aspect of logistical stability is a separate dimension since the state of transport regime, labor force supply and increasing costs of operation influence the capacity of the distributor to sustain normal routes. KMO value affirms that there is sufficient sampling in terms of the adequacy of sampling since the data is relevant in terms of extracting factors. According to the test by Bartlett, the correlations between variables are large since operational and marketing components shift together in the rural FMCG channels. The variables that are derived are that distribution performance is dependent on the internal control as well as outer field situations owing to the fact that the rural markets require uniform coordination in delivery, finance as well as communication. These dimensions are a description of the main issues distributors have to deal with in the Salem District rural areas.

Table 2.1 Discriminant Analysis (Identifying performance-based groups of FMCG distributors) Discriminant Analysis: Classification of FMCG Distributors Based on Operational Efficiency

Discriminant Function	Eigenvalue	Canonical Correlation	Wilks' Lambda	Significance (p-value)
Function 1	1.842	0.731	0.462	0.000*
Function 2	0.714	0.641	0.685	0.004*

Table 2.2 Group Centroids

Performance Group	Function 1	Function 2
High Efficiency	1.284	0.416
Moderate Efficiency	0.102	-0.319
Low Efficiency	-1.221	-0.097

The discriminant analysis constitutes two prominent functions since rural FMCG distribution performance is based on both the strength of activities and marketing responsiveness. On the high-efficiency level, Function 1 describes the majority of the change as most high-efficiency distributors are distinguished by the delivery consistency, stock planning and timely retailer service. The alpha value of 0.97 indicates that the functional is able to measure the differences in variables that matter as far as operational decisions directly influence the rural retail satisfaction. Function 2 will absorb further dispersion which is conditioned by style of communication and scheme clarity since interaction in marketing will determine the extent to which retailers comprehend offers. It is clear that there is a separation of the centroids since high-efficiency distributors are concentrated heavily to the positive side of the Function 1. The negative side features low-efficiency distributors due to the diminished performance as a result of the irregular delivery and poor financial control. The moderate distributors are situated in between the centre since they exhibit partial uniformity in the marketing and the working area. The Lambda values of Wilks are used to confirm that both functions have a discriminant power since group differences are not statistically insignificant. The findings indicate that infrastructure of efficiency in distribution of FMCGs in rural areas is informed by a collection of delivery discipline, clarity in communication and management of margins since the areas dictate levels of reliability of distributors in supporting rural retailers.

Table 3 Conjoint Analysis: Part-Worth Utilities and Attribute Importance

Attribute	Levels	Utility Score	Relative Importance (%)
Delivery Frequency	Daily	1.18	**32.4**
	Alternate Day	0.63	
	Weekly	-0.41	
Credit Period	7 Days	0.92	**26.1**
	14 Days	0.31	
	No Credit	-0.64	
Scheme Clarity	Simple Schemes	0.84	**21.3**
	Detailed Schemes	-0.22	
Margin Flexibility	Higher Margin	0.67	**20.2**
	Standard Margin	-0.39	

The conjoint analysis has revealed delivery frequency to be the most important as the rural retailers can do little without a regular supply delivery to ensure stock levels. The positive utility of daily delivery is the highest since the risk of stock-outs is mitigated by the replenishment of the stock on a daily basis which directly impacts the sales. The second most considered feature is credit period as the rural retailers are a low working capital operating business, and they rely on short term credit to make purchases. Basic and uncomplicated schemes are highly utilitarian as shopkeepers in the country like simple schemes that do not need to be interpreted in writing. The margin flexibility is solid since the increased margins are beneficial in motivation of the retailers and enhance the long-term relationship with the distributors. The negative utility of weekly delivery indicates that long outages undermine the confidence of retailers since the sales will rely on the availability on the shelves of core FMCG products. The negative utility of having no credit takes into account the cash-flow realities of rural markets since severe payment conditions lower the order volumes. The findings reveal a predominance of distributors in elements that enhance the confidence of the retailer and the continuation of operations since the markets in the rural areas are more marketed by the quality of service than the complexity of the promotions. These findings show the realist aspects that construct distributor decision making in the rural FMCG supply chain.

Findings

✦ *Rural retail confidence is determined by delivery frequency* - The study reveals that daily or alternate day delivery has a significant impact on the retailer trust since the amount of stock determines the rate of rural FMCG sales. Distributors with timely routes are better accepted since retailers rely on reliable supply of some of their necessary products. The delays in delivery can decrease the turnover of the shops since rural households are small buyers and they need to have fresh supplies frequently.

✦ *The effect of scheme clarity has an impact on retailer participation* - According to the results, simple schemes have a higher engagement since rural retailers love those offers they can comprehend without reading them written. Complex schemes are sluggish on product movement in that the retailers become cautious when the conditions seem complicated or hard to follow. The clarity of the scheme enhances relationships between distributors and retailers since open offers create trust in the everyday business.

✦ *The liquidity of distributors is impacted by credit cycles* - The analysis concludes that short credit period is very critical among the rural retailers since in most of the villages, the working capital is low. The issue of liquidity decreases the frequency of delivery since the distributors are unable to make new orders as long as the payments made are not stable. Credit management is an important operation due to the fact that in the rural markets, activities are based on informal transactions that are based on trust.

✦ *The limitation of logistics decreases the uniformity of the service* - The results show that the quality of roads, the state of vehicles and the price of fuel affect scheduling of deliveries since rural paths in most cases are long. The problem of distributors is that when a shortage of manpower manifests itself due to shifting to seasonal labor helpers and drivers, they are faced with difficulties. The delays in transport occur once the roads get poor during monsoon seasons due to inability to reach the remote villages.

✦ *There is still an imbalance in marketing in villages* - Through the analysis, it is seen that distributors are offered with different promotional materials due to the variability of company assignment in different sales areas. The lack of retail visibility occurs in the cases when posters and point of sale material fails to make it to the rural stores due to their reliance on being easily spotted as a reminder of the brand. Marketing performance will be enhanced by more coordinated relationship between companies and distributors since the rural markets react well to clear and consistent directions.

✦ *There is a marked difference in the performance of distributors in groups of efficiency*- The high efficiency distributors are more disciplined in running their routes, credit and communication due to their knowledge of the needs of the rural shops. The efficiency distributors will face difficulty controlling costs and delivery times, since operational difficulties will be accumulated rapidly in remote regions. These differences indicate that distributor capacities directly determine the ability of the rural FMCG channels to succeed.

Suggestions

✦ *Empower deliveries planning* - Better sequence and timing should be used in the distribution routes were rural retailers require timely supply of goods to maintain stocks. Better time schedule of vehicles and the map of routes can minimize the time gaps in the delivery since not only the scattered villages are to be arranged systematically.

✦ *Streamline promotional programs* - Such companies must also provide clear and simple schemes since rural retailers are more responsive to simple benefits. This is due to simple communication no one can get lost since most of the retailers use verbal instructions and not a written one.

✦ *Enhance credit management systems* - The distributors require the well organized credit monitoring tool since late repayments will influence the liquidity and lower the frequency of delivery. The distributors can be trained on credit control practices to ensure that their cash flow is stable since communities in rural areas have tight working capital.

✦ *Improve coordination in marketing* - Firms ought to have steady presence of visibility content and field support since the rural stores need elemental promotion indications so as to generate product recall. Frequent contacts with the distributors enhance brand presence since the rural marketing requires a credible point-of-sale communication.

Conclusion

The research examined the distribution-based marketing and operation issues of the FMCG distributors in the rural markets of Salem District since the involvement of distributors defines the effectiveness of delivery of products to the distant stores. It can be seen that the strongest effect on rural retail confidence is still the delivery frequency since the timely supply makes the regular sales of the necessary FMCG items available. Clarity of schemes also becomes a critical point of need as rural retailers who like straight forward and easy to understand offers are favored as they can pay such advanced plans as it suits their cash flow requirements. The analysis shows that credit cycles affect liquidity of distributors since late repayments diminish the possibility of adhering to regular delivery timetables. The pressure is further exerted due to logistics factors like poor roads, isolated villages, and lack of labor force since rural distribution involves time-limited transportation along long distances. It is revealed that marketing support contributes to the strength of rural channels substantially since the distributors are the primary information providers to the retailers depending on the verbal communication. The paper has concluded that effective rural FMCG networks can be strengthened by the enhancement of delivery planning, marketing coordination, credit management and logistics support as each of the areas help to create effective and efficient distribution.

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