

Future Trends in Multichannel and Omni-Channel Retailing: Implications for Businesses and Consumers

Mr. Rajat Kumar Singh¹ and Dr. Mirza Shahab Shah²

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Commerce & Management¹

United University, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India

Professor, Department of Commerce²

K. S. Saket PG College, Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1773-6164>

Abstract: *The primary goal of this paper is to examine the challenges posed by the proliferation of distribution channels, known as multichannel, on both Marketing and Logistics. It delves into concepts that underscore the need for tools to streamline processes, minimize inefficiencies, and meet consumer demands, thereby providing competitive advantages for organizations. Multichannel operation revolves around prioritizing the customer in distribution efforts, striving to make products available across numerous channels while ensuring integrated information and consistent purchasing experiences. In essence, the paper introduces the concept of Omni-Channel, which seeks to integrate various channels—both physical and virtual—to cater to consumers who seek prompt responses and diverse retail options. Ultimately, the aim is to demonstrate how the integration of Marketing and Logistics activities serves as a strategic tool for achieving entrepreneurial objectives.*

Keywords: Marketing and Logistics

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive business landscape, particularly in the retail sector, companies face increasingly demanding customers who expect excellence in goods and services without a willingness to pay extra. Consequently, organizations need to seek tools that facilitate enhancement and yield compensatory outcomes. They must focus on optimizing processes, minimizing inefficiencies, and reducing delivery times, all while fostering enduring relationships with consumers.

In addition to providing more suitable and innovative products, Marketing must devise strategies that carefully cater to the desired target audience. This involves establishing contact points with the audience, aiming to generate satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term relationships. Within this framework, it becomes increasingly crucial to offer convenience and accessibility so that consumers can access products at the right place and time when they intend to make a purchase (Pestana, 2014, p.133).

Logistics plays a crucial role in balancing the competitive demands and ongoing improvements within companies by optimizing resources. Simultaneously, it facilitates enhancements in the organization's marketing activities and client relationships, aiming to meet their needs as conveniently as possible. However, this task becomes even more complex in the Brazilian context, considering factors such as geographic area, infrastructure, legislation, taxation systems, and the gradually increasing demands from consumers.

To remain competitive, it's essential to surpass market expectations. In the retail sector, simply understanding and fulfilling consumer needs isn't enough; as Pestana (2014, p.133) suggests, it's crucial "to provide solutions and experiences at different touchpoints with products and services, offering a purchasing experience valued by the consumer." This is where the concept of multichannel comes into play, with its core premise being the prioritization of the customer in distribution efforts, thereby influencing their decisions. Multichannel strategies aim to make products available to consumers through numerous distribution channels and contact points, encompassing various store layouts to better suit consumer preferences. The overarching goal is to generate integrated information and, most importantly, deliver consistent purchasing experiences.

Retail stands as the primary distribution channel for various reasons outlined throughout the article. However, the competitive landscape continually challenges companies in this sector, necessitating rapid adaptation to new scenarios. Retailers must ensure product availability across multiple channels, meeting or exceeding their customers' needs while leveraging various formats to expand their market reach. Concurrently, they must utilize logistical tools to optimize resources, reduce time, and cut costs. Those able to accomplish this will undoubtedly gain competitive advantages. As Pestana (2014, p.135) emphasizes, it's insufficient to merely offer diverse store layouts, whether physical or virtual. Instead, investment in the intelligence of logistical operations is essential to foster synergy between channels and create integrated solutions.

The objective of this essay is to examine the challenges presented by the proliferation of distribution channels, known as multichannel, not only for Marketing but also for Logistics. Additionally, it aims to highlight the interdependence between these two crucial areas in the retail sector, emphasizing their roles as integrating agents. By doing so, the essay seeks to demonstrate how Marketing and Logistics work together to create competitive advantages for retail companies.

II. CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND MARKET DYNAMICS

One of the definitions provided by the American Marketing Association (as cited in Kotler & Keller, 2012, p.3) defines marketing as an "activity, set of knowledge, and processes aimed at creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offers that have value for consumers, clients, partners, and society as a whole." As such, managing these exchange processes has become an integral part of modern society's routine.

According to Kotler and Keller (2012, p.6), the exchange activities advocated by Marketing occur in consumer markets, comprising final users or organizational clients. These markets are defined as "a set of buyers and sellers who engage in transactions related to certain products" or types of products. Campomar (2012, p.31) further elaborates that it was the necessity to manage the relations between supply and demand of products that gave rise to the principles of marketing.

Larrañaga (2008, p.47) establishes a connection between marketing and logistical activities, highlighting the need for direct collaboration between marketing professionals and logistics personnel. The author emphasizes that when marketing professionals plan and strategize to achieve their objectives, they must coordinate closely with the logistics department to ensure the feasibility of proposed actions, underscoring the essential nature of integration between the two areas. Furthermore, Larrañaga explains that while the primary objective of the marketing department is to allocate resources to the marketing mix to maximize the company's profitability, one of the key objectives of the logistics department is to "minimize total costs for a specified level of customer service" (Larrañaga, 2008, p.48).

The exchange of strategies between marketing and logistics functions enables the following actions:

Ensuring that the service levels promised by the organization to its clients will be met.

Aligning service levels with the desires and needs of clients, as excessively high service levels can lead to unnecessary distribution costs and consequently higher final prices for clients (Maia, 2006, p.39).

Thus, Maia (2006, pp.39-40) underscores that one of the roles of Marketing is to determine comprehensively how to reach the target consumer through distribution channels, among other responsibilities, assessing the characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of each available model. Conversely, Logistics is tasked with planning and executing distribution activities, ensuring that products are made available to consumers. Consequently, it becomes viable to delve into the detailed concept of entrepreneurial logistics and how its tools can support the marketing activities of the organization.

III. AGILE SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

According to Façanha (2012, p.245), logistics is a comprehensive process that encompasses the management of various aspects within a supply chain. This includes sourcing raw materials for production, the production process itself, and the distribution of finished products. Additionally, logistics involves handling reverse processes within the supply chain, such as the reuse of residues and their return to the production process. In this context, entrepreneurial logistics examines the organization and the requisite steps for the flow of products (goods and services) and information among distribution channels, partners, suppliers, retailers, and clients.

Logistics management, as defined by the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP, 2014), encompasses the planning, execution, and supervision of the efficient flow—both forward and reverse—and storage of

goods, services, and information between the point of origin and the point of consumption. Its primary objective is to meet the demands of customer requirements.

According to Bowersox and Closs (2001, pp.43-51), logistical activities play a crucial role in establishing connections between organizations, clients, and suppliers, forming a cycle of actions that encompass the entire flow of products from their origin (including byproducts and raw materials) to the point of consumption by the end user. These activities must be integrated to efficiently serve the needs of the consumer market while considering the optimal costs of operations, encompassing not only physical goods but also service provision. The authors delineate four major areas of logistical operations, along with their respective primary activities:

- **Sourcing logistics:** This area involves activities related to procuring raw materials from external suppliers. This includes planning, sourcing, purchasing processes, negotiation and selection of suppliers, order execution, initial transportation from the supplier to the ordering company, receiving and inspection of materials, and storage of raw materials. The primary objective is to support production or resale activities.
- **Production logistics:** These activities are associated with planning, scheduling, and supporting production operations. This entails coordinating the sequence of processes for manufacturing goods or services and executing production workflows.
- **Distribution logistics:** This area encompasses activities related to providing services or making products available to the end consumer. It includes processing purchase orders, controlling inventory of finished products (in the case of goods), storage and handling of products, physical transportation, managing relationships with distribution channels, and collaborating with the marketing department to engage with the market. The primary objective is to serve the customer in the most convenient manner possible at an acceptable cost.
- **Reverse logistics:** This function is responsible for activities related to the disposal of waste (both from production and consumption), handling of technical assistance and warranties, post-sale services, compliance with specific legislation regarding post-consumption (such as refunds), and managing critical situations involving the withdrawal of products from the market.

From the perspective of logistical processes, Bowersox and Closs (2001, pp.56-57) assert that the physical distribution of goods and service provision activities connect the company directly to its clients. These processes combine operations from both the production and marketing departments into an integrated effort. Therefore, the authors suggest that the company's ability to provide logistical solutions plays a crucial role in the overall effectiveness of marketing strategy. This is because these operations significantly contribute to making desired goods and services available to clients, as well as managing relationships with distribution channels, including retail channels.

IV. ROUTE-TO-MARKET STRATEGY

According to Kotler and Keller (2012, p.448), a distribution channel can be defined as a network of interdependent companies with the goal of making goods and/or services available for use or consumption. These distribution channels, also known as marketing channels, encompass the various pathways through which a product travels after production, ultimately leading to its purchase or utilization by the end user. The choices made regarding distribution channels management have a significant impact on all other marketing decisions and play a crucial role in determining a company's competitiveness.

According to Kotler and Keller (2012, pp.456-460), for an organization to design a system of distribution channels, it must analyze various factors related to adaptation and operation in its consumer market.

Firstly, it needs to identify the needs, desires, preferences, and purchasing goals of its customers, whether they are economic, social, or experiential in nature.

Next, the company must establish the objectives for each channel to be used, as well as any potential limitations they may encounter.

Furthermore, the organization must delineate the rights and responsibilities of each channel member and establish criteria for evaluating channel alternatives, which may include economic and control-related factors.

According to Motta, Santos, and Serralvo (2008, pp.46-48), it is essential to continuously study the relationships between distribution channels in order to interact with and understand new business scenarios effectively. Until

recently, retailers, industries, and even the marketing departments of companies operated in a somewhat disjointed manner. However, one of the new challenges facing supply chains is achieving effective integration among the various entities involved in bringing products to end consumers. In this context, the authors argue that the activities of trade marketing aim to align the strategy, structure, and operation of the company with the dynamics of the distribution channels, with the ultimate goal of better and more profitably serving their clients. This underscores the importance of adapting to changing distribution channel dynamics in order to remain competitive and effectively meet customer needs.

V. STRATEGIC MARKET ACTIVATION

According to Davies (as cited in Alvarez, 2012, p.155), it's crucial for industries to view retailers not merely as distribution channels, as this implies a level of power that manufacturers no longer possess in today's market dynamics. Retail channels are not controllable variables for industries, but rather, they should be seen as real clients who play a fundamental role in reaching the final buyer. As such, manufacturers are compelled to optimize their actions within the retail environment, recognizing that it is where the final consumer engages in the purchasing process. This includes interacting with the product, forming perceptions, and ultimately deciding whether or not to make a purchase. By catering to the needs of both the industry and the retail chain, manufacturers can enhance their position in the market.

D'Andrea (2012, p.116) underscores that trade marketing encompasses two vital aspects of the market area: not only promotional efforts aimed at influencing consumer behavior but also the management of channels to ensure products are readily available to consumers. Manduca (2012, p.135) further asserts that the complexity of trade marketing actions lies in its evolution into a strategic area for distribution channels. It has transitioned from being solely an operational area focused on actions at the point of sale to encompassing activities that manage relationships between the industry and its channels. Additionally, trade marketing now focuses on understanding consumer motivations and choices, which directly impacts the decision-making process for product purchases and brand selection at the point of sale. Consequently, the practice of trade marketing has contributed to changes in consumer behavior, relationships between industries and channels, and the emergence of multichannel and its various formats.

This highlights the importance of aligning trade marketing efforts with logistics activities to ensure optimal product availability and minimize stockouts at the point of sale.

According to Parente and Barki's analysis (2014, p.1), retail has become increasingly important in Brazilian business affairs and globally, assuming a significant role within distribution channels and supply chains. The negotiation process, the complexity of interactions among production chains, direct engagement with final consumers' needs, and the sector's sensitivity to economic fluctuations contribute to retail's role as a major driver of market transformation.

These transformations encompass various aspects, including professionalization within the sector, declining profit margins, increasingly detailed studies of consumer behavior, the impact of promotional activities on impulse purchases, the proliferation of new store layouts, relationships with the manufacturing industry, the emergence of powerful retail groups with significant negotiating power vis-à-vis suppliers, and the application of marketing concepts within this rapidly changing environment.

Overall, these changes highlight the dynamic nature of the retail sector and its profound influence on market dynamics, consumer behavior, and business strategies.

In this context, Alvarez (2012, p.150) emphasizes several crucial issues that must be considered in the evolving relationship between manufacturers and retailers:

- **Intense Competition for Consumer Preference:** Manufacturers and retailers are fiercely competing for the preference of the final consumer, with retailers holding an advantage due to their proximity to the shopper.
- **Logistical Integration:** There is a need for logistical integration between manufacturers and retailers to effectively manage daily operational needs such as stock management, product variety, new product introductions, and product availability.
- **Shift in Power Relations:** Retailers increasingly hold more power in terms of negotiation and decision-making, reflecting the growing influence of retailers in the marketplace.

These points underscore the importance of collaboration, logistical coordination, and understanding power dynamics in the manufacturer-retailer relationship to navigate the evolving retail landscape successfully.

Furthermore, Mattar (2011, pp.30-39) underscores the reality of multichannel distribution, wherein companies reach consumers through various traditional and non-traditional channels. This approach significantly expands the options for serving the market and allows companies to engage with consumers through multiple touchpoints.

VI. HOLISTIC DISTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

In multichannel marketing, as described by Kotler and Keller (2012, p.449), each distribution channel targets a different segment of consumers or serves different needs of the same clients. In this model, a single company may utilize various channels such as physical stores, sales catalogues, internet platforms, and telemarketing. It's crucial for companies employing multichannel marketing to ensure that these channels operate harmoniously and cater to the preferred methods of conducting business for each target client. This approach allows companies to effectively reach diverse consumer segments and meet their varying needs and preferences.

According to Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen (2005, p.7), it's important to distinguish between multichannel and multiple marketing channels. The use of multiple marketing channels involves employing different distribution channels to serve various types of consumer segments. For instance, a company might use personal sales for large clients and retailers for smaller clients. On the other hand, multichannel aims to reach the same types of consumers through different channels but in an integrated manner.

The authors further explain (2005, p.7-9) that the opportunities and challenges associated with multichannel distribution present numerous avenues for academic research. Some of the key questions and possibilities for research include:

- What are the characteristics of shoppers who use multichannels, and how does this usage influence company performance?
- What is the strategic role of multichannels, and are they a strategic necessity for companies?
- What organizational changes are necessary to provide clients with an integrated system that facilitates positive experiences across all channels?
- How can the transition to multichannel systems impact long-term relationships?
- How should companies allocate resources across multichannels?
- How do potential inconsistencies in information across multiple channels affect customer satisfaction and loyalty?

Addressing these questions can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and implications of multichannel strategies for companies in various industries.

According to Noble, Shenkan, and Shi (2009, pp.2-3), consumers who frequently utilize multiple purchase channels tend to spend more compared to those who use only one channel. However, leveraging multichannels poses a significant challenge for companies, as they must be prepared to serve clients in various contexts. Often, different contact channels operate differently, requiring them to complement each other. Despite their differing performances, these channels can mutually support and reinforce each other's operations. Furthermore, companies opting to work with multichannels must understand how consumers, technology, and competitors are evolving, as highlighted by the authors.

Parente and Barki (2014, p.407) underscore the importance of ensuring that each channel chosen by the company has a clear role. Consumers should know what to expect and find in each channel to avoid disappointment and frustration with unmet expectations. This emphasizes the necessity for companies to strategically define the roles and functions of each channel to effectively meet consumer needs and maintain consistency across multiple touchpoints.

According to Dietrich (2014), the concept of Omni-Channel began to gain traction around 2012, representing a significant challenge in managing distribution channels. It involves coordinating various channels synergistically, integrating processes such as logistics, storage, distribution, customer service, database management, and marketing. This shift in perspective stems from the evolving preferences of modern consumers, who prioritize the overall purchase experience, brand perception, and product quality over the specific channels used for buying. Dietrich argues that this new consumer-centric paradigm will impact the entire consumption chain, compelling retailers to prioritize customer satisfaction by enhancing service quality, investing in technology, innovating new services, redesigning store layouts, and delivering enhanced value propositions to meet evolving consumer expectations.

Winter (2012) emphasizes that retailers and brands now have the capability to interact with customers through a multitude of channels, including websites, physical stores, kiosks, mailers and catalogues, call centers, social media, mobile devices, games, televisions, and more. However, Winter warns that unless businesses adopt a new perspective—one that enables the seamless integration of these diverse channels into a unified and optimal omnichannel experience—they risk losing relevance and eventually disappearing from the market. Winter asserts that understanding the importance of and actively striving to create a new omnichannel experience is not merely an option but a necessity for survival and success in today's competitive landscape.

VII. NAVIGATING MULTICHANNEL COMPLEXITY

Rosenbloom (2008) underscores the importance of cooperation among members of a supply chain in distribution channel activities. However, conflicts may arise within these social systems due to factors such as undefined roles, resource shortages, differing perceptions and expectations, disagreements over decision control, aim incompatibility, and communication difficulties. Neslin et al. (2006) highlight the challenge of coordinating channel strategies in multichannel environments and emphasize the need for companies to integrate client data across channels effectively. Understanding consumer behavior in multichannel settings is also crucial, as it may redefine established segments and loyalty levels. D'Andrea, Cònsoli, and Guissoni (2011) suggest that integrating channels at consumer touchpoints offers benefits such as enhanced marketing planning and brand exposure.

Valos (2009) discusses the difficulties of managing multichannels, including the need to accommodate consumers' movement between channels during different phases of the purchasing process. Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Rahman (2013) foresee opportunities for personalization and collaboration between retailers and manufacturers in response to changing consumer behaviors. They anticipate increased competition but believe that companies can capitalize on business opportunities by understanding and serving their clients effectively.

Frazer and Stiehler (2014) stress the importance of creating an integrated experience, termed "Omni-Channel experience," which involves improving the purchasing experience across all channels. They advocate for an experiential marketing approach to evoke feelings, thoughts, and actions in consumers across various channels. D'Andrea, Cònsoli, and Guissoni (2011) assert that distribution channels, sales, and communication are converging into a unified platform shaped by consumers' preferences. Overall, managing multichannels and Omni-Channel environments requires new strategic marketing approaches to meet evolving consumer needs and expectations.

VIII. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In a more informal manner, marketing can be seen as a series of promises made to consumers. These promises include assurances that the product will meet their needs, offer the best value, provide status or self-fulfillment, deliver benefits and quality, meet deadlines, and offer a satisfying purchasing experience. Essentially, marketing promises that the exchange between the consumer and the company will be mutually rewarding and contribute positively to the consumer's life.

To fulfill these promises, marketing activities require organized processes, effective management, meticulous execution, continuous improvement, and efficient resource utilization. Logistics plays a crucial role in achieving these objectives. While many people mistakenly equate logistics with transportation, it encompasses much more. As Bowersox and Closs (2001) emphasize, logistics is essential for organizing production and marketing activities, ensuring products are available to consumers when and where they are desired. Logistics involves the planning, organization, and execution of both production and commercial activities, integrating operational and strategic considerations.

Trade marketing is another aspect discussed in this article, which remains contentious in academic circles. Trade marketing involves activities aimed at influencing consumer behavior and generating sales impulses, primarily in retail environments. However, it extends beyond sales environments and requires pre-sales activities to influence consumers effectively. Trade marketing also necessitates coordination and control of processes, including logistics, to facilitate collaboration between industries, retailers, and consumers, particularly at the point of sale.

Indeed, the interconnection between marketing, logistics, and trade marketing highlights the importance of making products available through various distribution channels to meet and exceed consumer expectations. Multichannel activities present numerous challenges that must be addressed for effectiveness and consistency.

Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen (2005) succinctly outline some of the significant challenges associated with multichannel distribution:

- Understanding the characteristics of consumers who use multichannels and how this usage influences company performance.
- Determining the strategic role of multichannels within the overall business strategy.
- Identifying necessary organizational changes to provide customers with an integrated system that delivers positive experiences across all channels.
- Addressing potential inconsistencies in information across different channels and their impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- Assessing how the shift to multichannel systems may affect long-term relationships with customers.

These challenges underscore the complexity and importance of effectively managing multichannel distribution strategies. Addressing these issues requires careful planning, coordination, and alignment of marketing, logistics, and trade marketing efforts to ensure seamless experiences for consumers across all channels. Additionally, adapting to changing consumer behaviors and technological advancements is crucial for success in the rapidly evolving landscape of multichannel retailing.

The information presented in the article highlights the significant changes that multichannel systems are bringing to dynamics, logistics, and consumer expectations in the market. However, there are many aspects of multichannel operations that require even more detailed analysis, as they are highly pertinent to the evolving landscape of retail.

One notable transformation is the shift from the concept of "distribution channels" to a broader model of "marketing channels." This shift reflects the convergence of distribution and communication tools within the realm of marketing. The integration of distribution and communication channels suggests that tools related to promotion and those associated with the place of sales and distribution are increasingly intertwined, sometimes blurring the lines between them.

The authors speculate whether alternative channels will serve not only as distribution channels but also as communication channels, given the growing importance of mobile channels and the physical environment of stores as experiential communication platforms. This integration of physical and virtual channels underscores the complexity of consumer behavior and the challenges companies face in serving the omnichannel consumer effectively.

In this context, meeting the demands of the omnichannel consumer through omnichannel strategies will require ongoing changes and updates to logistics processes and marketing strategies. Adapting to this evolving landscape will be crucial for companies seeking to remain competitive and meet the expectations of today's consumers.

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