

## **The changing role of the Category Captain in UK grocery retail market**

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The Changing Role of the Category Captain in UK Grocery Retail Market

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The Changing Role of the Category Captain in UK Grocery Retail Market

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**Abstract**

Category management is a collaborative approach to product selection and management between manufacturers (suppliers) and retailers to enable the effective management of product categories rather than individual brands. This paper reports emerging findings from research that explores the category management function and its role in value creation in the UK grocery retail market. Value creation within category management relationships is reported within the research as value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction. Using practice-based research, qualitative interviews of twenty five senior grocery category managers and retail buyers reveal the evolving nature and influence of the Category Captain role in a changing retail marketplace. The UK market is undergoing unprecedented change as discount retailers capture market share from established incumbents, and consumers become increasingly price sensitive and switch from branded products to private label. In this context, the role is being elevated and negotiated with a need to develop stronger, more meaningful and valuable relationships between the supplier and retailer. It is perceived that by strengthening the relationship between the retailer and the suppliers' involved in category decisions will enable a more consumer-centric approach to category development and value creation. Adopting the lens of a resource based view of value creation, findings from this research reveal that Category Captain selection and recruitment is no longer solely determined by economic resource and market power, rather market knowledge and insight is seen as the key determinant of a successful category relationship. The role of Category Captain is changing, and the new role referred to by the suppliers and retailers as the 'preferred supplier' requires a greater emphasis to become a trusted category adviser. It is no longer a 'seat at the table' bought through financial support, but one that has long-term sustainability from joint responsibility and bringing innovative and differentiated insight into the category. In conclusion the research suggests the future role needs to be impartial of the commercial function using a more 'open' and honest approach in a collaborative relationship led by the supplier. This marks a significant change in decision making related to this function and presents significant opportunities for private label suppliers and small suppliers to play key roles in category decision making and value creation. While present knowledge suggests that category managers' act impartially, this research also reveals that the role potentially brings further value to the preferred suppliers. This offers significant challenge to the role of trust and loyalty in category management relationships.

**Key words:** category management, grocery retail, category captain, trust, value creation, loyalty, branded, private label.

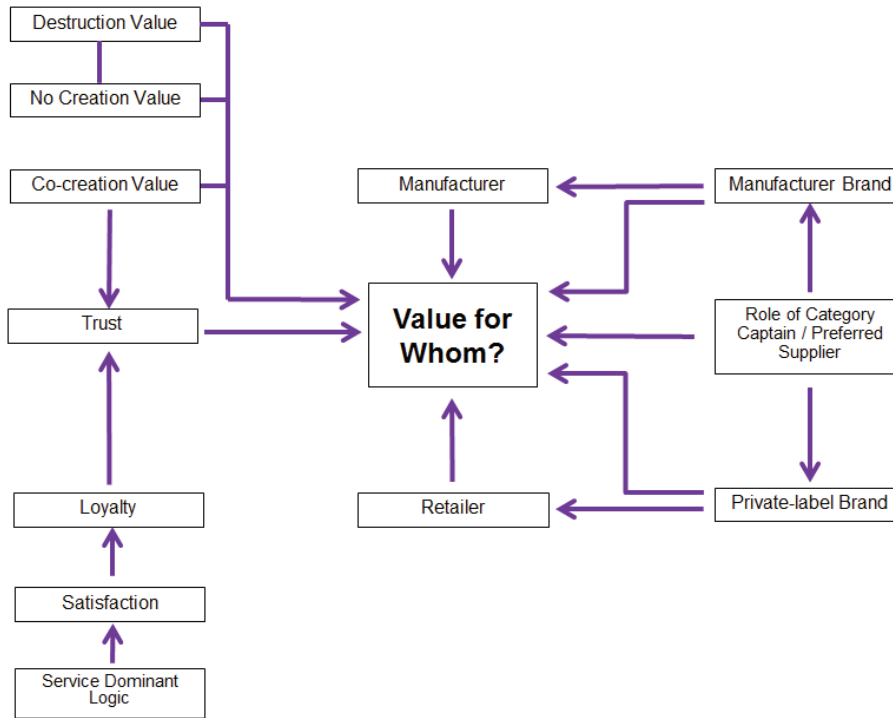
## 1. Introduction

The UK grocery retailing environment is currently experiencing unprecedented challenges resulting from growing complexities in the marketplace, and the need to satisfy increasing consumer expectation to provide better value (IGD, 2018). The Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) (2018) state this has presented the grocery industry with challenges to change current practice and meet the needs of an increasingly demanding consumer. IGD (2017) confirms three major influences that will impact the UK grocery sector in the next five years, and where the industry will need to focus their priorities. IGD (2017) state, following the UK's vote to leave the European Union, Brexit has changed the outlook for the UK grocery market. Growth of 15.4% over the next five years to £212.9bn will be driven by the return of inflation, but opportunities for volume growth will be reduced as disposable incomes are squeezed and population growth slows. Retail sales channels within the UK grocery sector are also changing, while online will remain the fastest growing channel its expansion will slow. Discounters will grow their market share faster than previously forecast, and the outlook for sales from larger stores is more positive than originally forecast but they will still lose market share. This research study is very timely as the UK grocery sector enters one of its most difficult phases for over one hundred years. It is important that the needs of the consumers are met through the grocery manufacturer (supplier), in particular the Category Captain supplier and the retailer working more collaboratively. The research explores how collaboratively the players, notably the Category Captain can co-create value, is this indeed happening, can it be improved or is it just rhetoric?

The literature review focuses on the Category Captain and the role of the category captain in the relationship. This role is pivotal within the category management relationship and how it impacts on relationships with other category suppliers (Kurtulus et al., 2014; Kurtulus et al., 2013; Desrochers and Nelson, 2013; Zenor Michael, 1994). The future role of the Category Captain will be considered as the research shows it progresses to be the 'preferred supplier' and that all suppliers within the category can now aspire for inclusion. The three phenomena of value creation investigated are value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction. The research appraises the role of the Category Captain (or the preferred supplier) and if private label and smaller suppliers can aspire to the role of Category Captain. The research endeavours to answer the question:

- What is the role currently played by the category captain in category management relationships, and how will this role evolve through value creation as consumers switch from branded to private label products. Can unbranded manufacturers (suppliers) seek to meet the criteria for selection in this new reality?

**Figure 1** - Conceptual Model - The changing role of the Category Captain in UK grocery retail market



The research adopted a theoretical lens of value through understanding value co-creation, neutral value creation, and value destruction within a business relationship. The conceptual lens of the research is the role of the Category Captain supplier in category management relationships and how the role will evolve to create value, and how other suppliers within the category can aspire the dizzy heights of the Category Captain.

## 2. Value Creation

The nature of value and its creation is an ever increasing debate with scholars, in particular the roles of internal actors (Gronroos and Voima, 2013; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). According to Ostrom et al. (2010) value is amongst the most important research topics in marketing, and Corsaro (2014) and ISBM (2011) say managers in industrial company's rate value as a top priority for business management. Value is seen in retail category management literature as the collaborative ideal that emphasises a 'triple win' for the suppliers, retailers as well as the consumers (Aastrup et al., 2007). This chapter has used 'actors' from the UK grocery sector who work within category management for the suppliers and the retailers including Category Captains and reviewed how together they collaborate within the category management relationship to create or co-create value, or even co-destruct the value.

### 2.1 Value Co-Creation

Makkonen and Olkkonen (2017) Edvardsson et al. (2014) and Gummerus (2013) state that value co-creation literature is scant. Value creation is a joint function in collaboration, where Vargo and Lusch (2008) say that

value creation is extended where suppliers and retailers work together and support each other's value-creation process. The role of individual actors in value creation processes has long been recognised within an industrial marketing context, and this research seeks to establish its importance in a category management context. The research has been viewed through the lens of Service-Dominant logic (S-DL) with a specific focus on the notions of operant and operand resources (Kohhli, 2011; Kowalkowski, 2010). Operant resources create competitive advantage and include resources such as the competencies of the 'actors' within the value creation process, in this case the category management relationship and the Category Captain.

## **2.2 Value No-Creation**

Value no-creation was launched by Makkonnen and Olkkonen (2017) to strike a balance between extreme notions of value co-creation and value co-destruction. It is in the middle of the dichotomy and is neither positive nor negative and often defined as the position of indifference. Makkonnen and Olkkonen (2017) state, value no-creation sits between co-destruction and co-creation, the notion of value no-creation is a conceptualisation that oscillates between the poles of co-creation and co-destruction.

## **2.3 Value Co-Destruction**

Value co-destruction is defined as an interactional process between service systems that result in a decline in at least one of the systems' well-being which can be an individual or organisation (Ple and Caceres, 2010). They state, that during this process these service systems interact either directly (person to person) or indirectly (via appliances such as goods) through the integration and application of resources (Ple and Caceres, 2010). Value destruction and value co-destruction is the negative side of value creation and value co-creation. For example within category management setting, the provision of negative operant resources occurs where a buyer provides the supplier with inadequate retail data. This will result in a poor category recommendation proposed by the supplier or Category Captain back to the buyer. As such a negative position will result in the relationship where both parties are frustrated and cause un-necessary tension in the collaboration.

## **3. Category Management**

Category management is defined as the strategic management of interrelated product groups known as product categories within trade partnerships where the product categories are managed as separate business units (Kurtulus et al., 2014; O'Brien, 2014, O'Brien, 2012; Hubner, 2011; Kurtulas and Toktay, 2011; Morgan et al, 2007; Nielsen, 2006). Retailers can gain competitive advantage over their competitors if category management is implemented effectively through collaborative working and achieving the latest data, insight and merchandising savvy to exceed consumer expectation (Kurtulus et al., 2014). Suppliers have the product expertise and manufacturing capacity whilst the retailers have shopper footfall and offer a full range of products to entice shoppers. Collaborative working maximises the skills within the relationship, and together the organisations will determine the most appropriate products at the right prices to meet evolving consumer demands.

### **3.1 Category Captain**

The Category Captain supplier (now known as the preferred supplier, category adviser) is one of the main and often most influential relationships within category management (Kurtulus et al., 2013). The Category Captain supplier is appointed by the retailer to manage the entire category on their behalf which according to Kurtulus et al. (2013) has a profound effect on the business performance for both organisations. The category captain is deemed to be the 'expert in category' as a key manufacturer within the category, and have a full understanding of their market (Harris and McPartland, 1993). The category captain is usually responsible for developing and recommending the category strategy which will then be adopted by the buyer. Morgan et al. (2006) state, the benefits of the Category Captaincy is it is an effective value-creating and value-claiming mechanism. The following research methodology was undertaken to help understand the future of the Category Captain role through qualitative research.

### **4. Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the research issue from the participant's perspective, and in order to establish rich and detailed data semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection method. In total 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants from the suppliers and 8 participants from the retailers. A further 5 follow-up interviews were carried out to 'deep dive' into key responses from the first interviews and ask the participants to provide some real examples. The participants were chosen from senior management and director levels as they are decision makers within their organisations and able to provide data which will help to address some of the issues faced in category management. The process of data collection started in November 2016, with the first interviews completed by November 2017 and the follow-up interviews by February 2018.

The analysis process included the researcher transcribing recorded interviews, multiple reading and interpreting of the transcriptions and NVivo coding. There were two cuts of coding, followed by categorising the key words, sentences and statements to result in three key themes emerging from the data.

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

The research findings show the main issues raised by the retailers of how value is created within the relationship, and how the role of the Category Captain is expected to evolve over the next 5 years. The retailer business entities within the UK grocery retailers have been categorised into Mainstream (M) and Premium (P) retailers. The researcher approached the Discounter retailers who were unavailable to participate in the research, and it is felt for future development the discounters and on-line retailers should be appended to the research. Mainstream (M) and Premium (P) retailers ensure a clear division between UK retailers and the differences in perspective will appear. It is widely accepted that different consumer profiles shop the different retailers, however in mainstream the retailers attract different types of UK socio-economic groups. The dichotomy of the two types will emerge and explain the differences or similarities. There were 10 retailer interviews carried out, 7 first interviews and 3 follow up interviews. The follow up interviews were to 'deep dive' into key findings from the first interviews and were for 15 minutes instead of the 1 hour first interviews. These will be discussed as 10 interviews rather than sub-dividing these into first and second interviews, unless there is a specific reason in the

argument to differentiate them. Of the 10 retailer interviews conducted 8 were Mainstream (M) and 2 Premium (P). As these are UK retailers all the companies are large size with a sales value turnover >£250m per annum. These will be defined collectively within the discussion as the 'retailer companies' unless there is a specific reason in the argument to differentiate them. The specific differentiating characteristics of the companies are shown in Chapter 3 Table 3.2. Finally the individual participant's commentary will only make reference to their position in the company only if it seen as appropriate at that point in the argument. This is because all participants are senior buyers and chosen for the research as they are all decision makers and do not require differentiation as they carry out the same category management functions. The retailer participants believe the following is how value is created in the category management relationship and how the role of the Category Captain should evolve in the future:

- 5.1 Sales Growth, Profitability and Sustainability
- 5.2 Expectation of Supplier's
- 5.3 The Consumer and Consumer Behaviour
- 5.4 The Provision of Reasoned Creative and Innovative Insight
- 5.5 Collaborative Relationships

### **5.1 Sales Growth, Profitability and Sustainability**

The retailer business entity participants have raised many positive and negative issues regarding what they perceive the nature of value to be and how these perceptions create value in relation to sales growth, profitability and sustainability. The issues raised in the is section were limited, however the retailers felt that Category Captain suppliers need to provide more volume growth rather than value growth by putting up prices. This would include encouraging shoppers to make more frequent shopping trips. The retailers believe that Category Captain suppliers are stuck in the availability trap and focus most of their attention in the supply chain and ensuring stores receive deliveries on time, and where this does not happen spend time chasing the deliveries.

### **5.2 Expectation of Category Captain Supplier's**

The second main area of issues raised by the retailers regarding what they perceive the nature of value to be and how these perceptions create value is in relation to their expectation of Category Captain suppliers. The retailers feel that co-creation of value is making sure that the Category Captain suppliers send their best people to work on the specific retailer account. Unfortunately the best category manager in a manufacturer cannot work on every retail account as often each one is attached to one retailer only to protect confidentiality.

### **5.3 The Consumer and Consumer Behaviour**

The third main area of issues raised by the retailers regarding what they perceive the nature of value to be and how these perceptions create value is in relation to the consumer and consumer behaviour. This is one of the three main areas reported by the participants for value creation in category management relationships. Value is concerned with Category Captain supplier delivering more for the shopper. The mission of retailers is to save consumers money, and often at the heart of the retailer mission statement is a claim of intention to do this. This



is through improvements in product range, pricing, availability and product that satisfy the emergence of 'shopping missions' such as purchasing for lunch boxes, picnics, seasonal and meal occasions. Multiple buyers need to get together through the Category Captain and work cross-category.

The value for the retailer is from getting the most spend from the shopper. This is in number of visits to the store, loyalty and increased purchase whilst in the store. Category Captain supplier recommendations need to be innovative as shoppers are 'time poor'. Improved product positioning will enable them to quickly shop the products they want, and this will leave a little time for browsing and increasing the number of purchases. Buyers need to get closer to their shoppers and competitors shoppers who can benefit from the knowledge and experience of the Category Captain supplier.

#### **5.4 The Provision of Reasoned Creative and Innovative Insight**

The fourth main area of issues raised by the retailers regarding what they perceive the nature of value to be and how these perceptions create value is the provision of reasoned creative and innovative insight. Insight is a fundamental aspect of category management and as the marketplace is changing the provision of personalised and innovative insight for retailer differentiation. Category Captain suppliers are expected to be experts in their field, and often they are expected to have knowledge of the wider category and understand the implications of actions within the category itself. Category Captain suppliers are expected to understand how to make sense of the data available in the market, and purchase the data. Category Captain suppliers are expected to invest heavily in the data whereas smaller and more niche suppliers expected to purchase less data but provide more creative and innovative insight. Category Captain suppliers create value by being 'experts' in their field as often retail buyers manage multiple categories and only stay in position for two years and cannot themselves become experts. They rely on the Category Captain suppliers to provide the recommendations for the category, but also other associated categories. They are therefore expected to understand their market, and this may include other sectors such as international cuisine to create a point of difference.

When Category Captain suppliers make category recommendations, value is added by providing insight to enable shoppers to 'trade up' which means to spend more money within the category. Category Captain suppliers will be asked to provide a sustainable category model which will include a promotional plan, and collectively protect the retailer's margin.

Despite what is perceived within the sector the retailers want Category Captain suppliers to add value by being honest and truthful about the category recommendations and this will include not being a 'yes man' and challenge the retailer. Provided the Category Captain suppliers have the evidence to make a strong claim that differ to that of the buyer they should make it without concerning themselves with loss of favour or business. Insight needs to be customer focused. The findings suggest Category Captain suppliers and retailers collectively visit stores and hold focus groups with shoppers, and talk directly to them about their shopping needs. This will allow joint value creation where the Category Captain suppliers and retailer to formulate long-term plans within the category management relationship. The provision of effective insight is seen as a differentiating factor for Category Captain suppliers, but it is the reasons for the decisions that add value in the category management relationship rather than the raw presentation of data.

### **5.5 Collaborative Relationships**

The final main area of issues raised by the retailers regarding what they perceive the nature of value to be and how these perceptions create value is the need to work in collaborative relationships. This is the main issue of the retailers which was the same in the previous section where the Category Captain suppliers saw collaborative relationships as the main issue. Retailers believe that value is co-created where the Category Captain suppliers work collaboratively with them and the businesses become strongly aligned together. The company's remain separate but effective collaborative relationships involve working together, sharing resources, knowledge and leveraging best efficiencies in the overall supply chain process and provide the consumer with what they need. The retailers interviewed had strong opinions regarding improving collaborative working with all Category Captain suppliers. Retailers are continuously seeking long-term collaboration with Category Captain suppliers, as long-term gives more stability in the relationship for both parties, and ensures appropriate investment can be made to secure future consumer needs. The participants report that longer-term relationships inspire innovation and creativity when reviewing categories. Retailers are looking to the Category Captain suppliers to provide a more holistic view of the category rather than focusing on their own products. Category management is about managing all the products that are categorised within a similar grouping, and it's important every company supplying products within the category is considered in the planning.

Category Captain suppliers need to move away from upsetting the buyer and losing business and be more assertive with new and differentiated recommendations. They need to be 'open' with the buyer and understand what is expected of them and how the buyer feels they can deliver that. Retailers also feel strongly in the relationship and declared that where suppliers do not align with their strategy they will seek alternative Category Captain suppliers. This is particularly relevant with private label supply, as it is more of a challenge to substitute brands into the category. The retailers also believe that the category team need to operate independently to the commercial teams, as they operate more holistically and do not associate directly with the commercial objectives. As there are new sales channels emerging in the market such as on-line shopping, the discounter's business model Category Captain suppliers are expected to be responsive to change and operate category management in different sales channels. They also need to be able to embrace new technology and how this impacts on category management including Virtual Reality (VR) and mobile technology.

This section has explained how the UK retailer businesses involved in the research understand the nature of value creation and this is where the Category Captain suppliers need to develop for as sustainable role in the future.

### **6. Contribution and New Knowledge**

The paper makes a contribution to the literature and to category management practice. The researcher is keen to close the gap between academia and practice, and through practice-based research the literature will reflect what happens in practice and practitioners will work with academics for mutual benefit. The contribution and new knowledge resulting from this paper for the literature is:

1. Value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction is limited in the category management literature. The literature review explained that value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction are fundamental in collaborative relationships and as category management relationships are grounded in collaboration this needs to have greater attention in the literature. The use of qualitative interviews rather than large quantitative analysis has allowed the category management practitioners to explain value creation in practice. The thesis will therefore update the value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction literature by introducing the concept of category management into the theory. It will also raise the profile and importance of value co-creation, value no-creation and value co-destruction in the category management literature in relation to the Category Captain which is currently very scant. Academics need to understand the importance of value creation in category management from the perspective of what is really happening as opposed to developing knowledge from previously incorrect material. The voice of the practitioners has helped to address this need.

2. The use of senior practitioners from both the supplier and retailer side of the category management have ensured the study benefits from the viewpoint of senior decision makers within the sector. This ensures the findings accurately reflect both sides of the collaboration, and as these were qualitative interviews allow the practitioners reality to emerge.

3. The category management literature still refers to the role of the category captain. Following the practitioner interviews both stakeholders advised the position became extinct in the UK over five years ago. It is replaced with the role of 'preferred supplier' (discussed in the paper). Qualitative interviews with senior practitioners research has identified that both the suppliers and retailers agree the traditional category captain role no longer exists, and it is evolving. The paper will update the category management literature and inform academia that the role has changed in the UK grocery market. The role, however currently remains in the USA grocery market.

The contribution and new knowledge resulting from this paper for practice is:

1. It is the researcher's belief from the interviews that there is a dichotomy between what is said in collaborative category management relationships than what is believed by both suppliers and retailers. As the category management relationship is commercial there are high business stakes being challenged, and so day to day honesty between the parties is often shadowed by a desire not to upset the other stakeholder. This results in rhetoric between the two stakeholders that everything is fine in the relationship and value is being co-created. The reality is this is not the case and in fact there is frustration and so often value co-destruction. The research will raise this issue and encourage deeper collaboration and a more 'open' approach between the parties to address the challenges. The research has shown the following frustrations currently exist, and by raising these issues contributes to practice:

- Category Captain suppliers are unhappy with the demands placed upon them by the retailers and category management begins with the retailers mission rather than that of the consumer
- Category Captain suppliers are frustrated because profit is the key driver for the retailer rather than shopper satisfaction

- Small suppliers and private label suppliers are frustrated because they do not have an equal chance to have a seat at the buyers table, and the Category Captain supplier continues to be the chosen partner
- Retailers are unhappy with the standards of the insight presented by the Category Captain supplier and the other supplier's. They say that the insight presented is often re-engineering of the data which everyone has access to and needs to be more creative and innovative

The paper also contributes significant improvements to academia and practice and has opened up a channel for further research in Category Captain value creation within category management relationships.

## **7. Future Research**

The research in this paper is limited to the UK grocery sector and has a limited sample of UK grocery sector manufacturing Category Captain's and UK grocery retailers (buyers and buying directors). Therefore generalisations for practice are restricted beyond the UK grocery sector. The research did not include participants from UK discounters as access to these stakeholders is difficult due to the nature of their job roles. Therefore a wider range of participants beyond grocery would expand the scope of the study, and this could be from further qualitative studies or even a large quantitative study.

## **8. Summary**

It is evident that value creation is significant in the role of the Category Captain supplier. Practitioners from the UK grocery sector representing the Category Captain supplier and retailer perspectives have openly explained the reality of the role of the Category Captain and value creation in category management from their own experience. Using qualitative interviews the research has allowed the practitioners to say what really happens rather than what is supposed to take place. This will allow the category management literature to be updated and reflect reality rather than the continuum of writing literature based upon previous literature that is not always correct.

Value co-creation is momentous within UK grocery category management relationships and is seen as the cornerstone of a successful category management relationship. However the findings show that value co-destruction is more evident in the Category Captain's role than was previously understood. As it is fundamentally a commercial relationship the Category Captain suppliers are keen to please the retailers and will tolerate the demands put upon them to maintain a healthy relationship with the buyer. The findings suggest that the both parties want a more 'open' relationship and build upon the competencies and capabilities of each to produce sustainable category growth. The role of the Category Captain is therefore evolving, it is seen as pivotal to collaborative relationships in the future if they create value and respond to the recommendations in this paper.

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