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Sustainability conscious retailing and prosumerism in supply chain management: The Case of CRAI "EcoPoint"

Abstract

This paper aims to describe how an Italian retail chain was able to involve customers in a sustainability conscious supply chain. The research focuses on the scheme to reduce packaging which encouraged customers purchase loose products by weight.

Green supply chain management is attracting considerable attention in both the academic and business worlds. It is defined as integrating environmental thinking into supply chain management, and includes aspects of green design (i.e. Life-cycle assessment and environmental conscious design) and green operations (Srivastava 2007). The operations consist of remanufacturing, reverse logistics, and waste management. Reverse logistics means the reverse flow of products from consumers to suppliers. Used products, for example, can return from consumers to retailers for recycling and remanufacturing, and retailers are required to reduce disposal and collect used products in recycle-oriented supply chains. However, collecting returned products from consumers is time consuming. The problem is how retailers should manage waste and reverse logistics with their customers.

CRAI, an Italian cooperative voluntary chain, was selected as a research site because it operates a sustainability conscious scheme for customers. The "EcoPoint" system developed by CRAI aimed to solve the problem of reducing disposal and dealing with returned products. Multi-layered interviews with top management and store managers were used in our case study.

We found that 1) “EcoPoint” was effective in reducing packaging , 2) Customers were encouraged to use the scheme for both sustainability consciousness and economic reasons, 3) “Eco point” is appealing to consumers as a tool of promotion in terms of retail reputation. We conclude that although it has only recently started and is still experimental as a total green supply chain management, “EcoPoint” has some effect on one part of the recycle oriented chain management at CRAI.

This research implies that green supply chain management is a recycling loop which consists of efforts by manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Retailers are taking an important role in joining up the “loop” by encouraging consumers to take part in the sustainability conscious scheme.

Key words: green supply chain, sustainability, prosumerism, reputation.

Introduction

The issue of sustainability, especially greenhouse effect gas emission, is a top priority for the international community. The retail sector is approaching this issue through attempts to reduce energy consumption of stores, reduce amounts of packaging and carrier bags and by recycling containers, packages and used clothes. Freight transport and logistics are also increasingly important; many retailers are shifting freight transport from trucks to rail or sea in order to reduce CO2 gas consumption. Some retailers have also started Life Cycle Assessments (LCA) to assess total process of material transportation, energy consumption of manufacturing, and so on.

Retailers are facing a trade-off problem. They are required to reduce greenhouse gas emission but at the same time they need to open new stores for sales. The involvement of stakeholders, including employees or customers' is becoming necessary to carry out sustainability related projects. For example, retailers in the UK are focussing on the "carbon footprint", which reveals levels of CO2 consumed in packaging, transport etc.. It is a way of communicating the progress of an emission project to consumers. Persuading consumers to accept retailer's strategies is becoming a significant aspect of sales strategy.

This paper aims to describe how one Italian retail chain was able to involve customers in the sustainability conscious supply chain. Retailers have direct contacts with their customers and are positioned in the supply chain network, and it appears that increasing numbers are encouraging their customers to become more environmentally conscious. The research focuses on one retail scheme which encouraged customers to purchase by weight and reduce the amount of packaging.

The paper is organised as follows. After a review of green supply chain management, it focuses on green operations in the retail environment. In the next section, the role of environmental prosumerism is discussed in relation to the issue of

sustainability. A scheme involving customers in the green supply chain network is described from the perspective of prosumerism, focusing on the case of an Italian retail chain, CRAI. Issues in the green supply chain and retailer roles are emphasised in the last section.

Literature review

1. Green supply chain management

The concept of green supply chain management (GSCM) has recently emerged in the two research areas of supply chain management and environmental management. Srivastava (2007) defined GSCM as 'integrating environmental thinking into supply-chain management, including design, material sourcing and selection, manufacturing processes, delivery of the final product to the consumers as well as end-of-life management of the product after its useful life' (pp.54-55). The concept covers aspects of green design such as life-cycle assessment and environmental conscious design and green operations, consisting of remanufacturing, reverse logistics, and waste management.

Reverse logistics generally means the reverse flow of products from consumers to suppliers. Earlier approaches to reverse logistics focused on the distributing function in recycling (e.g. Guiltinan and Nwokoyer 1975). Compared with the original concept of distribution of product returns, recent development of the concept focuses more on logistics in the light of environmental considerations such as reduction of packaging and the environmental impact of mode selection (Banomyoung, Veerakachen and Supatn 2008, Carter and Ellram 1998, Rogers and Tibben-Lembke 2001). Based on a literature review, Carter and Ellram (1998) developed a holistic view of reverse logistics which includes resource reduction. Resource reduction refers to minimizing materials, waste

and energy through the design of more environmentally efficient products. The recent broader concept of reverse logistics is defined as ‘green logistics’ to distinguish it from reverse logistics (Rogers and Tibben-Lembke 2001).

Research on reverse distribution has focused on product recovery (Gungor and Gupta 1999, Thierry et al. 1995), inventory management (Fleischmann et al. 1997, Sasikumar and Kannan 2008a) and networks for reverse logistics (Sasikumar and Kannan 2008b). The issue of how to design a network for reverse logistics involves the efficiency of supply chain. The traditional distribution channel is termed a ‘forward channel’ in contrast with reverse distribution channels; there are some patterns of distribution systems through both forward channel and reverse channels. Types of reverse supply chain such as open-loop or closed-loop chain have been modelled and tested in terms of optimisation (e.g. Del Castillo and Cochran 1996, Jayaraman 2006, Min, Ko, and Ko 2006, Shih 2001). However, Tibben-Lembke and Rogers (2002) have pointed out the inefficiency of reverse logistics in the retail environment.

2. The position of retailers on the green supply chain

Tibben-Lembke and Rogers (2002) specified the differences between forward and reverse logistics in a retail environment at various points such as forecasting and management of inventory, the degree of standardisation of product quality, packaging, channel, etc. They claim that reverse logistics occurs in response to actions by consumers or downstream channel members. It is difficult to forecast the amount of returned products and to plan an inventory. Reverse logistics is also characterised by ‘many to one’ transportation, and is inefficient. Moreover, the collection of end-of-life products from consumers and their return to the manufacturer is tedious and time-consuming (Sasikumar and Kannan 2008a).

Retailers are positioned as a junction point of both forward and reverse

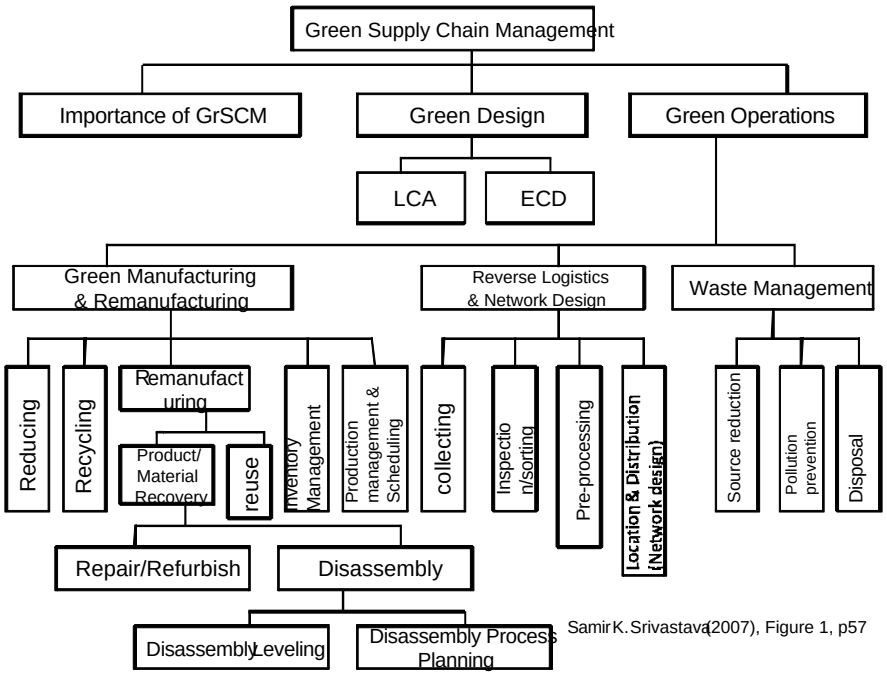
distribution channels, because the reverse logistics starts with collecting a product returned by consumers in a retail context. In recycle oriented supply chains, used products are returned from consumers to retailers for recycling and remanufacturing, and retailers are required to reduce disposal and collect used products. The issue of how retailers should manage waste and reverse logistics with their customers is important, but the retailer's role in the supply chain often tends to be overlooked (Jones P., Comfort D. e Hillier J. , 2008), .

Much attention is currently being given to green supply chain management, but there is room for much wider consideration of how to reduce materials used for products and packaging. Retailers in fact have opportunities to develop the green supply chain by encouraging their customers to return packaging and by reducing packaging materials of goods.

3. Ecological prosumerism in green supply chain management

Unlike manufacturers, retailers have direct interaction with their customers. Retailers are the interface with consumers in selling products from the supply chain. And recently, in addition to simply selling products to consumers, methods of selling as services to customers are becoming important.

Figure 1 Classification based on problem context in supply chain design



Samir K. Srivastava (2007), Figure 1, p57

Retail is a service sector that to a large extent has become consumer experience-dominated. The many authors studying retailing from this perspective include Bitner et al. (1997), Kelley et al. (1990), Lugli (2005), Martinelli (2009), Kinney et al. (2007), Dong et al. (2008), Norggran (2009), Montagnini et al. (2009).

The idea of prosumption- *production and consumption*- attracts a great deal of attention in relation to green consumerism. Green consumers are defined here as those supporting environmental causes. The concept of “prosumer” was originally developed by Alvin Toffler (1980) and indicated the merging roles of “producers” and “consumers” in post-industrial society. Recently, however, the concept has acquired additional meanings. Prosumption now refers to voluntary consumer involvement in producing services and business activities. It includes new initiatives in areas such as:

- *payment* such as self-scanning or self-check out;
- *self recovery* : where prices are wrongly labelled, customers can indicate

these mistakes and receive bonus in money or extra point for the collection by loyalty card; This practise can be extended to out of stock , the absence of products on the shelf;

- queues at the cashdesk: where a queue is too long, customer can complain and receive extra points on their loyalty card. This is a best practice at SuperQuinn in Ireland;
- control of sell-by date: where a product is near the end of its shelf life, customers can indicate this and receive free product;
- return of glass for recycling: customers returning glass receive refunds;
- vending machines, self-service and online payment ;
- new promotions, such as self leafleting. In 2008, Carrefour gave shoppers the opportunity to choose the basket of products offered as promotions.
- New green incentives. Tesco has recently introduced a new service in which they award customers with extrapoints on their loyalty card for environmentally friendly behavior; for example customers who recycle their shopping bags or telephon batteries.

This long list should include non food sectors; IKEA for example is by far the most frequently cited example of prosumerism. Semi-automatic services such as gas pumps sales or car-washes are further clear examples. In the electronics sector, there are some hypermarkets which are asking the customer to build a customised personal computer with help from the sales personnel. More generally, when a retailer makes the opportunity for prosumerisim there is a stronger idea of a fusion between producing and consuming. Prosumerism provides a a new link between the parties and opens the way to new forms of benefit from the cooperation.

And in prosumerism, environmentally-aware consumers are expected to more actively involve services offered by retailers. If retailers offer more self-sufficient or

self-reliant services, environmentally-aware consumers are expected to choose them because they have a lower impact on the environment.

Our research question is how a retail chain can involve customers in the sustainability conscious supply chain, and what factors are effective in green supply chain management, especially in the retail environment.

Research Methodology

A case study was carried out to research the question, as appropriate for the context and the interaction (Yin 1994). The environmental activities in the supply chain involve several actors including manufacturers and freight companies, as well as retailers and consumers, and our aim was to investigate the interactionsof these actors in the supply chain system.

The Italian retailer CRAI, which set up a sustainability conscious scheme for customers, was selected for our case study. Direct observation was carried out and multiple interviews to top and senior management were conducted in 2009. Published materials and customer surveys were also used. As well known, case studies method leads to both generating and testing hypotheses. The limitations are linked to the absence of a rigid protocol to examine limited number of variables but the qualitative method involves an in-depth examination of a single instance or event (Dul et al. 2008)

A Case Study: CRAI "EcoPoint"

1) "Environmental prosumerism": a new philosophy from CRAI

CRAI is a nation-wide food store chain in Italy. It started in 1973 when a small group of food retailers joined forces as a cooperative. The formula found immediate success because CRAI gave members benefits in terms of better conditions for the purchase of goods. There is often one store per neighbourhood. CRAI is found over most of Italy and has more than 2500 retail outlets in local areas. It reached a turnover of 3.2 billion euro in 2007.

CRAI "Eco Points" first opened in 2006 give a functional layout to the sale of bulk products with the aim of drastically reducing packaging waste . At "EcoPoints" products traditionally purchased in packaging such as pasta, milk, detergents, rice, cereals, pet food, etc.. can be bought by weight, loose and unpackaged. The "EcoPoint System" was developed as a joint project with the Planet Life Economy Foundation, when surveys revealed that a significant number of consumers are interested in environmental issues. The consumer packages the product him/herself at the point of sale,– *co-sale, co-logistics* - and his/her advantages vary according to supplier strategy. The goal is to offer a service able to make the consumer confident. CRAI is planning to introduce "Eco Points" in up to 100 stores by the end of 2009.

Competitors of course have brought out similar initiatives. In Italy, hypermarkets such as Auchan also offer price savings, and in the USA organic food shops, e.g. Wholefood, emphasise their protection of the environment. CRAI focuses on two types of benefits; price and green awareness. Price savings are allowed by a low margin policy: all savings from the absence of packaging are directly passed on to the consumer. The investment in dedicated spaces and shelves for unpackaged products is repaid in terms of image and word of mouth, but not in terms of profits.

Doubts on the productivity of prosumerism have been raised by many empirical studies and often concern consumer opportunism. Examples are the non-replacement of trays in self-service eateries and the number of thefts occurring in self service shops

selling goods with high unit value. Optional customer contributions are in this light a form of 'organizational citizenship behaviour' (Bettencourt, 1997; Kendrick,1985; Goudarzi, 2009). Customers can influence the process of service production and the quality of service (Kelley, Donnelly and Skinner, 1990; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003), as well as productivity (Chase, 1978; Goodwin, 1988; Gudergan, 2009). In this light, CRAI is offering a *service presented as an innovative form of selling, where the real objectives are related to dialogue*.

A quantitative measurement of EcoPoint economic performance is beyond our scope in this discussion but there exists of course a great deal of literature on the marketing of services which shows that in many cases active consumer participation in the supply of a service does not lead to economic benefit for the firm. But the fact of the matter is that the level of satisfaction among users of new service is high as far as aspects such as time-saving, security and self-esteem are concerned.

2) The results

Our findings can be classified into three categories.

2.1) Customer experience

The first category of information is provided by a field survey of a panel of 273 consumers buying Ecopoint products in a six month period. This panel was selected amongst frequent EcoPoint customers and their profile compared with the average CRAI customer profile. Frequent EcoPoint customers tend to show a higher level of commitment:

Fig.1 The Ecopoint Profile

	Average	Ecopoint
Single ticket value	17,13	27,66

Single product value	2,14	1,97
Number of products bought	9,31	14,05
Monthly Frequency of buying	2,88	4,34
Percentage of EcoPoint purchase on grocery's purchase	2,13%	8,85%

Source: Internal field interviews - panel of 280 customers

The product categories most frequently bought are, in descending order: pasta (24% of the total Ecopoint revenues), laundry and home washing (22%), pet food (14%), sweets (13%), rice (11%), breakfast cereals, (11%), dried fruit (4%), dried vegetables (1%). The main reasons customers gave for appreciating EcoPoints have been pointed out in Fig.2.

Fig.2. The Ecopoint benefits

Price	63,1%
Environment	34,2%
Customisation	33,2%
Entertainment	25,1%

Source: Internal field interviews - panel of 280 customers

The levels of social and hedonic benefit appear to be high. Satisfaction levels were also high as 52% of the panel said they would repeat the experience, 44.3% were willing but not sure and only 3.4% were dissatisfied.

2.2) Economic and environmental results

The impact of EcoPoints on sales is open to discussion. EcoPoints account for a very small percentage of sales, although it is growing. This growth is not damaging the traditional shelves, although the reaction of individual brands varies. In fact, in many categories the most affected brand is the category leader, while premium price and low prices appear to be indifferent. But the profits from Ecopoint cannot be compared with that of traditional self-service given that the mark up is kept very low in order to encourage sales, while the cost of eco-shelves, weighing-scales, bags and labour is above average.

The economic effects however have to be weighed against benefits in enviroment . A survey on a single point of sale after one year of EcoPoint activity confirmed significant environmentally positive results. Big savings can be made on traditional packaging of paper, plastic and glass; a single point can save about 50.000 packs a year, or over 300 kg paper, about 180 kg glass and 280 kg plastic. To date CRAI has opened 34 EcoPoints and thus implemented total savings of 5,7 tons of paper, 3,1 tons of glass and 4,1 tons of plastic. These figures appear high, but are not yet high enough to warrant a dedicated green supply chain, Trucks, deposits and stocks are always combined with traditional products.

About CO2 emission in transport we cannot notice the same level of environmental benefits. The “EcoPoint” scheme is effective in terms of CO2 emission during production and consumption -less pack- while it’s difficult to build a eco-friendly logistic as the distance between store and factories cannot’ be reduced for most of the products sold in “Ecopoints”.

In general terms, the low economic advantages for Crai appears to be weighed by the relevant benefits for the enviroment. But the final balance between economic and enviromental effects can be studied at the light of the reputation results.

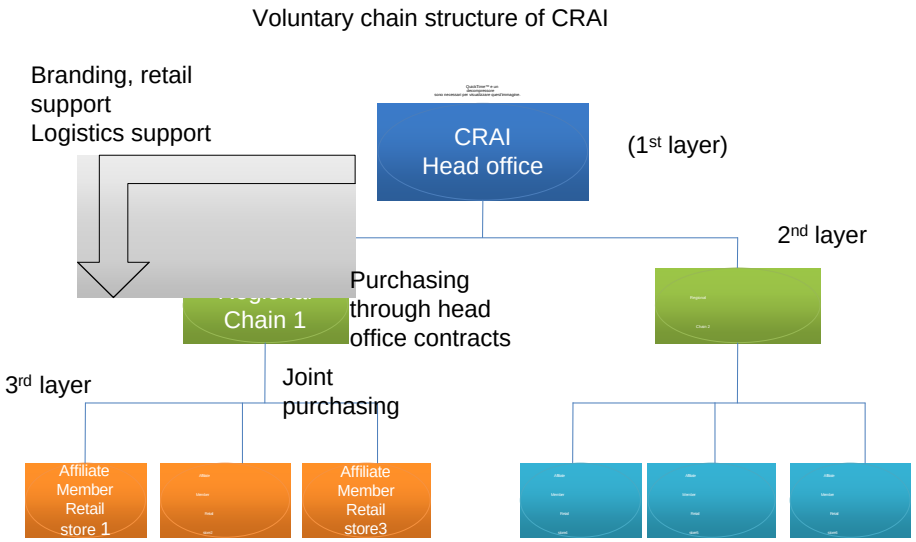
2.3) Reputation policy

The active role of customers and the selection of green suppliers (e.g. Dried Food Producer, Pedon) helps CRAI to maintain high a general reputation over the whole of the supply chain.

The organisation chart of CRAI is shown in Fig.3. As it is a cooperative voluntary chain, there are three levels of management. The owners are store manages, affiliated to a local regional chain which follows general headquarter policies.

Being owner and store manager at the same time gives the owner the role of "first line manager" are working in the store, in direct contact with customers. This implies a high level of commitment from the bottom to the top, a sort of "socialization of work" which makes it easier to share with the collaborators the value and the mission of the company (Vijiande et al., 2009; Uzoamaka et al., 1999; Paulin, 2006; Feldman, 1981; Buttgen, 2008; Fisher, 1986).

Fig.3 The organisation chart



At the second level of the organisation, the Regional Chain centres coordinate their

buying and logistic activities with headquarter policies. Supplier selection is one of the principal activities, and we examined one of the main suppliers of dried vegetables.

Pedon Group is engaged in social responsible activities. Their products are organic and sourced in developing countries, where Pedon has made direct investment to ban child labour and assist working mothers at work by setting up workplace nursery schools. These activities are well known by the CRAI stores and communicated to the customers (see Fig. 2 about consumer experience).

Nevertheless, in order to check the effectiveness of CRAI communications policy on this, a comparison was made with competitors. CRAI faces a great deal of competition in communications on environmental and social initiatives. In particular, we discovered that CRAI does not publish a "Social Corporate Responsibility Report", a legal and formal document to publicize their efforts, while certain competitors do so (Figure 4). In particular, major retailers, such as Carrefour or Metro appear to have a stronger communication policy compared to CRAI..

Fig.4. The contents of Social Responsibility Communication

	Carrefour	Coop	Auchan	Finiper	Metro	Esselunga	Simply	Conad	Unes	Pam	Crai
ENVIRONMENTAL TOPICS											
consumer involvement			x	x							x
store enviromental impact	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
distribution center impact	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
supplier involvement	x	x		x	x	x		x	x		x
SOCIAL TOPICS											
human resource management	x										
local suppliers	x		x	x				x			x
social cooperations and charity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
equo-solidal products	x	x	x			x		x	x	x	
food education	x	x	x	x		x		x		x	x
food wealth and security	x	x									x
SOCIAL CORP. RESP. REPORT	x	x			x			x			

Source: company advertising (on line and off line)

This evidence appears to be an area of potential investment for Crai.

3) conclusions

Our basic research questions were:

- how a retail chain can involve customers in the sustainability conscious supply chain?
- what factors are effective in green supply chain management, especially in the retail environment?

Ecopoint users are directly involved in co-value creation through a green operation in a new form of ecological prosumerism. CRAI's first line managers, appear to be committed this project. CRAI appears to have gone only half-way towards obtaining financial returns from investing in EcoPoints. Establishing a "total green supply chain" at present would appear to be an over-ambitious target. From a strictly economic point of view, to date supply chain lacks the required economy of scale.
In order to achieve these. Crai is increasing the range of products with new cleaning products and pet foods and also the number of stores involved. In the meantime, the savings on pack costs are relevant and are transferred directly to the customers. Moreover, field interviews confirm a growing customer awareness of environmental issues, and CRAI may have an interest in reinforcing its strategy, given that its competitors are insisting on their own concern for the environment.

We found that 1) The "EcoPoint" scheme is effective in terms of CO2 emission, 2) Customers are encouraged to use the scheme for both sustainability consciousness and economic reasons, 3) The scheme is appealing to consumers as a tool of retail promotion in terms of retail reputation. We conclude that the "EcoPoint" scheme, although in its early stages and experimental in some aspects, has some effect on a part of the recycle-oriented chain management at CRAI.

From a managerial point of view, Eco point relates the life cycle assesment of a product (design, packaging, sourcing, delivering) to the green supply chain management. Projecting an environmentally freindly supply chain appears as a big challenge. The intuition of Crai is relative to the customer involvement. Consumers accept the idea of sustainability. Eco point is easier way for consumers to participate. By just purchasing the product through eco point, consumers feel they are co-creating value for sustainability. This new responsability implies a strong commitment from the top, in this case from Crai, with many implications for the communication and reputation policy.

Implication and further research

This research implies that green supply chain management is a loop which consists of efforts by manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Certain retailers are taking an important role in joining up the “loop” by encouraging consumers to join sustainability conscious schemes. Limitations of this reasearch are related to the use of case studies in qualitative research. Nevertheless new perspectives have been introduced by this case. The first is connected to the economic results of this new challenge. When and how an eco-friendly supply chain will be also profitable? The second is related to the communication policy. In absence of profit, at what extent the environmental effort will be repaid by reputation benefits?

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