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On how retailers approach the buying negotiation process: a case in understanding retailer buying behaviour

1. Introduzione

Understanding retailer buying behaviour (RBB) has become increasingly important from both food and grocery suppliers' and retailers' points of view. Developments in the structure of the food and grocery supply chain have made retail chains become gatekeepers to consumer markets¹, since producers wanting to sell their products to consumers have to sell them to retailers first. In order to create and maintain a trade and cooperation relationship with retailers, knowledge of retailer buying behaviour is not be ignored by producers².

These considerations notwithstanding, no conceptual model of retailer buying behaviour has gained wide acceptance so far, and this might be the reason why the research findings appear fragmented and as yet incomplete. In particular, it appears that most of the previous research has been concerned with generating lists of criteria used by retailers when deciding whether or not to accept a new product; other areas that have caught the interest of researchers are: the role of buying committees, the relationship with manufacturers, European buying alliances, the use of information, retail buyer task, salesman influences, acceptances of trade deals, country of origin effects and new information technology.

It seems then that more research is needed to understand retailers' choices on products and manufacturers, and in particular the behaviours that from those choices ensue, such as negotiation practices.

This paper is based on the belief that it would be rewarding to study in more depth that particular area of RBB issues that concerns business negotiations. It presents the analysis of a case study concerning a buying central dominated by one of the major distribution players in Italy³. The buyers of the central employed a methodology for preparing the negotiation process, in order in the first place, to individuate the economic and assortment goals of annual contracts negotiation and in the second place, to be able to present the supplier with a rationale for discussing over areas of conflict resolution within which to bound the negotiation itself. Such representation of the negotiation feasible area for the buyer constitutes a multidimensional conceptual space which can be manipulated by both the negotiators, although presented and interpreted by the buyers in a favourable way, in order to facilitate resolution and contract closing, a practice which mirrors the tenets of a cognitive semantics framework of representations.

The paper begins by illustrating how previous literature indicates a need for focusing attention on the issue of retail buying negotiations, and in particular on the construction of negotiations. It then presents the case study to be analysed and introduces a cognitive semantics framework for analysing buyers' representation of the negotiation. The single dimensions and the

¹ Hirschmann, Stampfl 1980.

² Davies 1990.

³ Within the given buying central, one retailer group accounted for 92% of the revenues of the central in total.

whole conceptual space of the negotiation are discussed, as well as the implications of the approach, and an example is also presented. The analysis shows how in the given case study the preparation of negotiation is geared to presenting the supplier with a rational, actionable confrontational situation, in accordance with previous literature findings⁴. Finally, conclusions are drawn which advocate the desirability of further research on negotiation constructs and antecedents in RBB concerning annual contracts settlements, in the light of the exploratory nature of the present study.

2. Negotiation in Retailer Buyer Behaviour models

Negotiations between the manufacturer and the retailer are of course vital in establishing the terms of trade, and whether there will be any trading: if negotiations break down, the retailer will have to settle for a less than ideal supplier. Despite the obvious importance of business negotiations, only a few studies have investigated the aspects of this interaction⁵. A common thread in these studies is the emphasis on closer and long-term relationships between manufacturer and retailer. It is in fact not uncommon for relationships to last 6-8 years⁶. It therefore appears that a model of retailer buying behaviour should incorporate some kind of processual angle that would capture the different kinds of negotiations that take place between the retailer and the manufacturer, both first-time negotiations, and repeated ones. Lindqvist (1983)⁷ analysed 44 manufacturer - retailer negotiations by interviewing both parties. He found that negotiations can be split into three categories:

- Annual contracts, namely negotiations where the parties agree upon the general terms of trade or whether there will be any trading at all.
- Joint marketing campaigns, namely negotiations where the parties agree upon joint national marketing campaigns.
- Product negotiations, namely negotiations where the manufacturer offers the retailer a new product or product group for listing, or the retailer considers de-listing.

Literature review shows that it is almost exclusively on this last category of negotiations that researchers' attention has been focused so far, and even then, only few researchers have analysed it in terms of negotiation. Moreover, the issue has not been much scrutinized in terms of buying negotiation itself, but rather it has been approached from a pure retailer perspective, that is, taking into consideration merchandise requirements and not as much economic or profit or organizational ones⁸.

This paper takes its cue from the above considerations. It attempts to provide an initial contribution towards a bridging of the gap of research on negotiation processes in retail buying, by focusing the analysis on annual contracts negotiations. Annual contracts set the trait for buying conditions with the individual producers, and also define discounts, promotional contributions and prizes, payment and delivery conditions. In particular, this paper addresses the question of how retail dealers face the negotiation issue and prepare for it before actually reaching the table.

Various models of business-to-business purchase have been developed which can be applied to retailer buying behaviour; the most widely tested and known are Robinson's BUYGRID⁹, the Sheth model¹⁰ and the Graham model¹¹. These models have not been developed specifically for use with retailer buying behaviour, yet they have been employed for research on RBB as they provide a basis for taxonomy. Some models have sprung up from such research which are geared specifically

⁴ Perdue, Summers 1991; Ganesan 1993.

⁵ Hansen, Skytte 1998.

⁶ Knox, White 1991; Shaw et al. 1992.

⁷ Lindqvist 1983.

⁸ Hansen, Skytte 1998.

⁹ Robinson, Faris, and Wind, 1967.

¹⁰ Sheth, 1979.

¹¹ Graham, 1987.

on RBB, yet none of them is conclusive and pervasive¹². In particular, these models provide either a processual framework whereby the contents of the process are left as “black boxes”, or they provide lists of criteria to be employed for analysis within each of the steps of the buying process, but the process itself is not analysed both in its structure and contents. For example, we know that a number of different criteria are used by commercial and/or industrial buyers to decide between alternative products. Nilsson and Høst (1987) reviewed 34 earlier studies, identifying a large number of criteria used when retail buyers assess suppliers. Their synthesis of these findings suggested that potential sales level, delivery, and financial terms were frequently used decision attributes by buyers within a RBB process, but how they are used is not investigated. Weber *et al.*'s (1991) subsequent review of 74 articles since 1966, which examined the criteria used in selecting suppliers by all types of industrial buyer, identified many of the same criteria. These two papers form a comprehensive list of buying decision-making criteria.

Additional literature corroborates these lists and adds to them. Shipley (1985, p. 35), for example, argues for the importance of a blend of product quality, price and delivery performance, whilst recognising that these three criteria are augmented by “other variables that will enhance the resellers’ internal efficiency and/or external saleability”. Möller (1985) views price and technical specifications as typical threshold criteria, “table stakes” that suppliers must demonstrate before a the buyer will add them to a consideration set. Profit in its various forms and also sales volumes are indicated throughout the literature as very important criteria in the decision-making process (Swindley, 1992). More specific to retailing, mark-up, products meeting regulations, competitive pricing, suppliers’ known track record (reputation), manufacturers’ initial abilities, potential market volume, image and products fitting new trends in the market have been identified as being important (Banting and Blenkham, 1988). A study of the factors influencing the choice of a supplier by grocery distributors, conducted by McGoldrick and Douglas (1983), points towards the general reliability of the supplying company, quality of the brand and delivery reliability as being important, whilst trade incentives are ranked low as decision criteria. According to Fairhurst and Fiorito (1990), the buyer is evaluated in terms of gross margin return on inventory investment, which in turn is mostly influenced by the type of merchandise, buyer decision, job experience and the level of training received by the buyer. The criteria according to which the buyer is appraised could also influence the criteria for decision making that are used.

Thus, several criteria around which research could be organized have been found, pertaining to different realms of the retail buying process. According to the Sheth model, for example, retail buying revolves around the following interrelated constructs: intra and inter organizational factors influencing merchandise requirements, which in turn, together with supplier accessibility, influence choice calculus rules, thus aiding in identifying an ideal supplier which is then matched, via negotiation and through exogenous considerations, with the actual supplier or product choice¹³. By matching process models and taxonomy models, general items intervening as primary choice factors in negotiations have been identified, such as price, time of payment, stock keeping, cooperative activities, volume, margin, assortment¹⁴, but these have not been explored in terms of negotiation constructs for preparing to the negotiation itself. That is, the rationale behind the choice of a particular set, of criteria and of using them within one particular step of the process have not yet been investigated. Besides, although retailers and manufacturers usually make annual contracts negotiations, during which general terms are settled which remain as a basis for future, specific product or point of sale specific negotiations, very little research has been conducted on which kinds of factors may intervene in the annual contracting process which set the grounds for establishing and maintaining long term relationships between suppliers and retailers.

Peterson and Lucas (1993) call for a deeper research focus in what they term a gap in existing RBB models, namely the step conducting to negotiation. A negotiation table is in fact the

¹² Hansen, Skytte 1998; Peterson, Lucas 2001.

¹³ Sheth, 1981.

¹⁴ Lindqvist 1983; Bowlby, Foord 1995.

result of a set of preparation activities which can vary in intensity, but are nonetheless fundamental, with their presence or absence, as well as in their modalities, in understanding RBB. The present paper thus suggests that within relatively established models of RBB such as the one by Sheth¹⁵, a connection should be established between the choice calculus and negotiation constructs, and that this connection should be researched in terms of preparation or planning for negotiation. It thus seeks to gather exploratory knowledge of how preparation for negotiation of annual contracts might occur, and on whether and how an encompassing rationale is built in the preparation process, in order to provide hints for future research, as well as critical insight on an existing process.

3. Representing negotiations

This paper is based on data from a case study concerning a major Italian mixed goods retailer. It seeks to provide initial, exploratory insight on the way dealers prepare for the annual contracts process of negotiation with suppliers, and on which means and strategic rationale they plan to call on in order to try set the pace and boundaries of the negotiation. The methodology for this case study implied that the researcher participate as an observer to the construction of the methodology, the application of the methodology to the various producers' negotiation files, and finally to one of the negotiations themselves. This involved several interviews with the various buyers comprising the 5 buying commissions of the retailer (liquids, cans, fresh products, toiletries, sweets and bakery), as well as participation to the various buying committees' meetings which preceded negotiation and which were held in order to prepare each product category negotiation file and negotiation strategy, by producer, for several of the categories, across the 5 commissions. Data for analysis were gathered by the retailer from the internal IT system as well as via the market data provider IRI Infoscan.

Such data, once plotted according to the methodology employed were discussed systematically, and each producer's product category was compared in performance with that of competitors, so as to individuate a rationale for negotiation and for claims of improved contractual conditions. Soft data about the producers, data not included in the methodology, were also brought into the discussion and contributed to the analysis of the situation of each producer, but were not explicitly included in the negotiation file which delineated the negotiation strategy and the argumentative outline. The reason why this occurred is that the effort by the retailer was to build the negotiation onto rational, pinned down grounds:

“We wanted to sit a negotiation where we could do better than stamping our fists on the table or argue forever on flimsy grounds”

(Buyer, Toiletries commission).

Thus, each product category was plotted onto four matrices which together gave a representation of the situation of the various producers' product for that category, one vis a vis the other, or as comparing in the different retailer format comprised in the buying central, thus configuring a representation of the competition among the various producers of the category, as viewed by the retailer, or of the differentiated performance of the supplier within the different formats, where it has to be remembered that annual contract conditions are the same across all formats. Each producer emerged from this system of representations as in a relative strength position vis a vis competitors or the retailer. This evidence could then be acted upon during the negotiation: a producer with a weak position was emerging from the representations as having a small area for negotiation with the retailer, and as having to face various guerrilla or retaliation threats on the part of the retailer, whereas a producer with a stronger position was going to be faced with a more compromising attitude, mirrored by a wider confrontational area.

In order to gain an understanding of the conceptual grounds of the pre-negotiation methodology, this study applies a conceptual framework developed within recent studies in

¹⁵ Sheth 1981.

Cognitive Science, so as to achieve a better understanding of the elements that compose a dealer’s negotiation approach and framing, and of the way they are organized in a coherent strategy. Taking into consideration a single retailer buying central, the methodology used by buyers in setting up the arguments and representations of the negotiation issue for each one of the producers involved is analysed on the lines of a cognitive semantics approach. Cognitive semantics maintains that the representation of concepts be organized around conceptual spaces, namely sets of dimensions which identify a conceptual set¹⁶, and that a metaphorical negotiation of meaning (namely, on what contractual conditions might be acceptable for both parts) can happen within such conceptual spaces.

Imagine the case of the negotiators having two different contractual conditions goals in mind, where the condition revolves, say, on two dimensions, and the goal condition is represented as a point in the ensuing Euclidean space, as in Figure 1. If the parties are ready to negotiate, an area around the goal of each party can be individuated which represents the negotiation area within which solutions are deemed acceptable, and possibly there will emerge a common, intersecting area which is feasible for both parties, thus configuring a successful negotiation. If this intersecting area does not exist, negotiation will break down. The line represents the efficient frontier in a hypothetical Nash equilibrium.

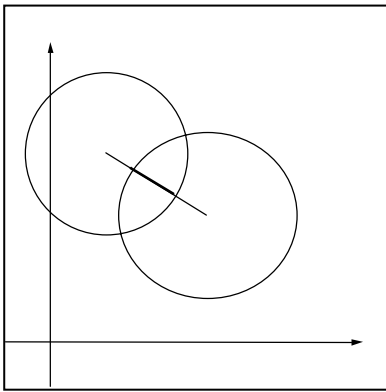


Figure 1: The intersection between the two negotiation circles is an example of feasible solution area of a negotiation between the two parties, based on two criteria (the dimensions of the negotiation plane).

If an intersection is not present, the negotiation can still be settled, if the dimensions are manipulated so as to modify the parties’ negotiation feasible areas. This can happen, for example, by modifying the salience of one of the dimensions, which might be brought to be perceived by one of the parties as more relevant (Figure 2). The producer, for example, might be persuaded by the buyer that a certain factor reduces the producer’s claims in the negotiation (for example, a weak competitive position such as the one that might emerge from one of the buyers’ representations here described). Also, one of the dimensions of the negotiation representation as proposed by the buyer might be acted upon, if the buyer succeeds in maintaining the negotiation revolve around his chosen dimensions only.

¹⁶ For example the concept of colour is represented a the three-dimensional conceptual space, the colour spindle, construed on the three dimensions of hue, brightness and intensity.

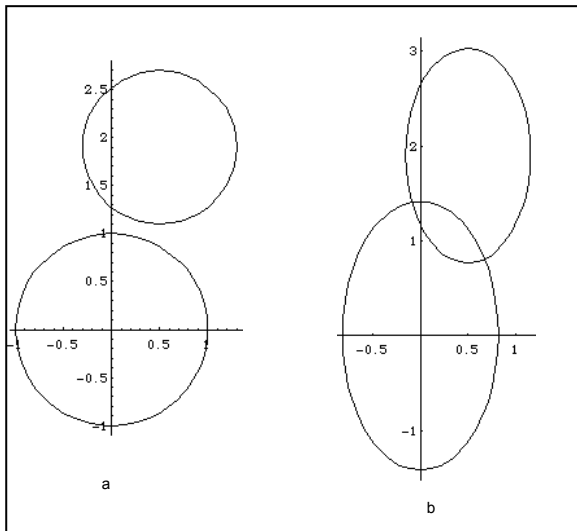


Figure 2: Creation of an intersection area for negotiation settlement by giving more salience to the vertical axis dimension. Graph a), no settlement is possible; Graph b), a settlement is possible thanks to the change in salience of one of the two variables shaping negotiation.

This tenet allows for an analysis of the way the issues pertaining the negotiation are organized into the comprehensive, coherent representation of the negotiating arguments the producer is to be presented with by the retailer, since the negotiation feasible area is construed by several dimensions which turn into a space, and yet each dimension can be considered individually or in association with one more dimensions, in couples, for example. This way, the system of dimensions considered to be relevant by the buyer can be decoupled or used as a whole, according to the way the negotiation is to be structured or to how it turns out to be when actually in progress. Thus, the focus of the analysis is not on the single elements that come up in the negotiation process, but rather on the way they are jointly used by the retailer in order to extract better contractual conditions from the producer¹⁷.

4. A case in preparing for negotiation in annual contracts

The methodology devised by the retailer here taken into account is based on four 2x2 matrices, on which the situation of a producer for what concerns a certain product category is plotted, both in order to compare it with that of competitors, and to contrast it with the single producer's performance within each of the retail formats or retail brands managed by the retailer. A comparison with national averages is also present, so as to furnish a wider angle and rationale to the analysis.

The four matrices all have one dimension in common, namely market share, whereas the second dimension is in turn: total discount points; gross margin; average price; number of references in assortment for that category. An example of the matrix showing a comparison among competitors is shown in Figure 3.

¹⁷ This interpretation of negotiations in terms of representations is a free interpretation of an unpublished paper by Massimo Warglien (2002). Nonetheless, every mistake rests with the author.

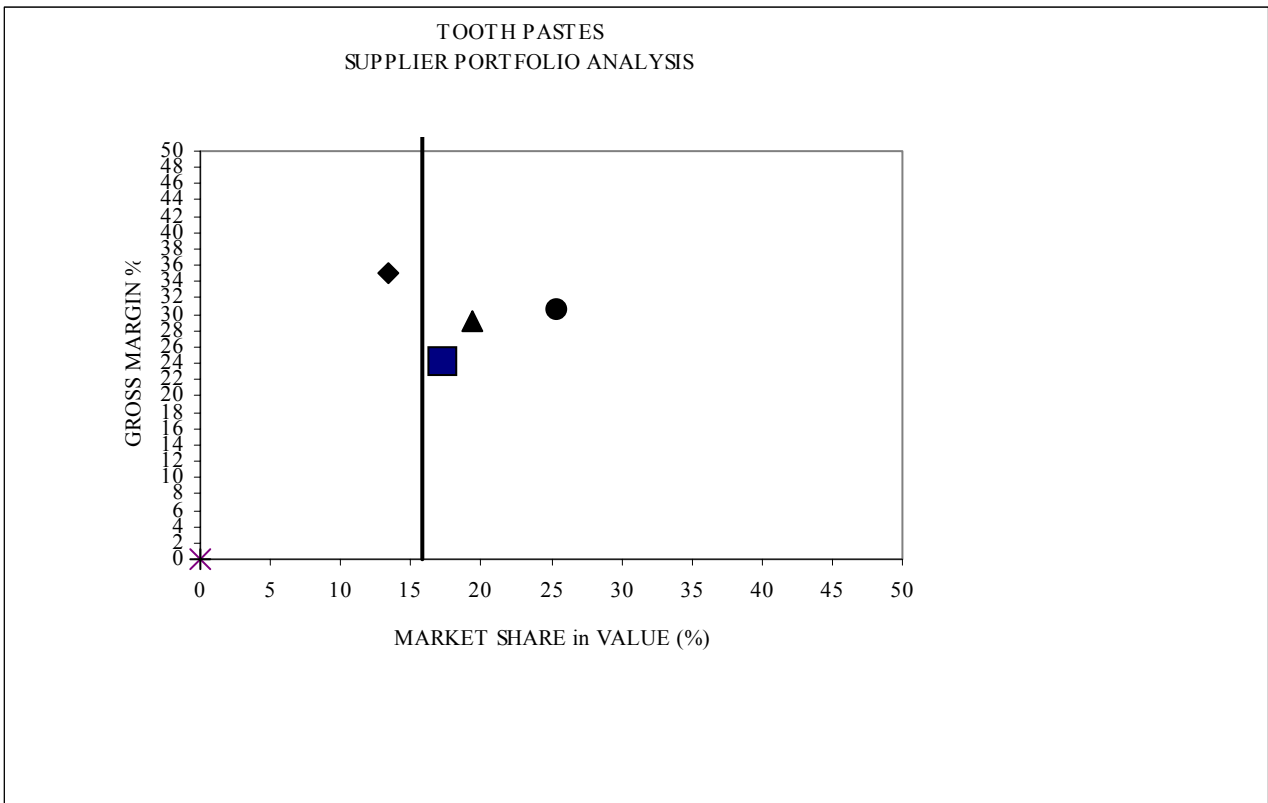


Figure 3: The supplier portfolio performance matrix. The blue mark is the producer, the black marks are competitors and the vertical line shows market share national average for the producer

In this example the producer (the blue mark on the graph) shows to be in a weak negotiation position via a vis its competitors (the black marks), since it enjoys a market share, within the retailer, higher than the national average, yet its gross margin is lower with respect to competitors with a higher market share. The negotiation will be shaped by the buyers as a negotiation on margin points, since or the producer will be threatened to be brought back in market share, in line with national average, since the feasible area is set by the buyer around a higher margin axis.

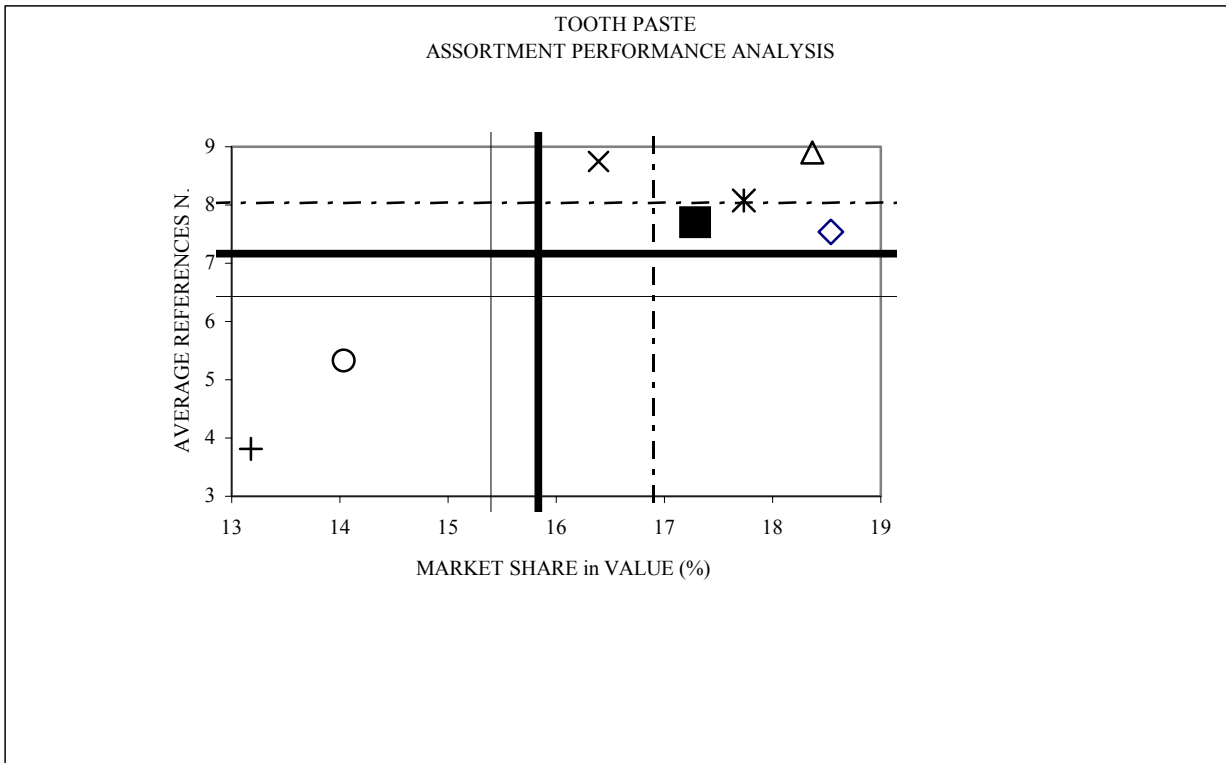


Figure 4: Assortment performance matrix. Thick lines indicate national average; thin lines supermarket average; dotted lines hypermarket average. The black square indicates the buyer central average, the other marks indicate performance in the different stores of the retailer group.

A second matrix is the assortment matrix, whereby the producer is shown to enjoy a vaster assortment, in a given category, than national average, as well as a higher market share. A move towards a rationalization of the assortment can be threatened if margin points are not improved, since the producer is now profiting from a high level of shelf investment, on the part of the retailer, which helps sustain his market share well above national average. The remaining two matrices (coupling market share with average price in one case, and with total discount points in the other) work in a similar way, again plotting the situation of a single producer within a single category, marking the general performance across the various retailer’s formats, and for each one of them, with the same kinds of averages indicated as in the assortment matrix. Figures 5 presents the strategic rationale for one of these two analyses, namely the performance-discount conditions matrix, as postulated in the retailer’s buyers guide to preparing negotiation. The matrix explains the rationale of creating “areas” for negotiation within which the plotted data show the supplier to fall into. Once coupled together with the other analysis, the matrices point towards a negotiation feasible area for the retailer, which can then be presented and argued with the supplier, in order to let him come to terms with the same negotiation dimensions as those set by the retailer. This way the supplier is driven to shape his own negotiation area upon such dimensions, unless it can provide a rationale as strong to counter the retailer’s requests. Interestingly enough, a few suppliers presented the retailer, over the following year’s annual contract negotiation, a similar analysis and negotiation rationale, thus coming to terms with the retailer on the same grounds as those presented by the latter.

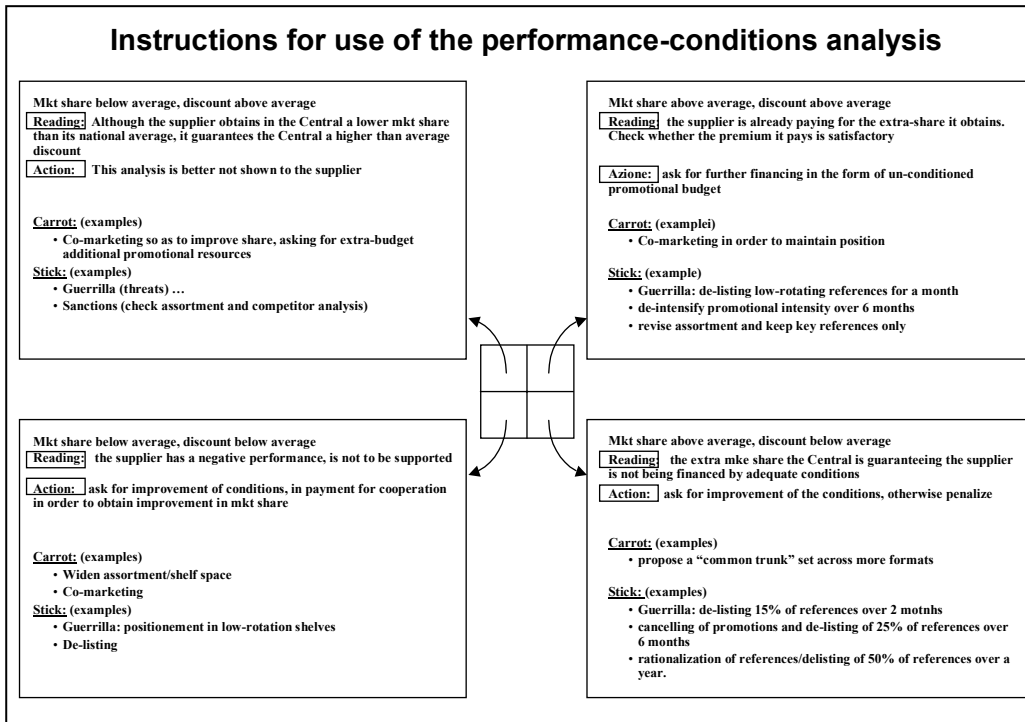


Figure 5: Example of rationale for use of the performance-discount conditions matrix.

From these examples, it appears how the methodology works as a system, although one of the matrices can be ignored in case it plays against the retailer. The negotiation file of each producer is construed so that it leads to a set of strategic actions to be threatened as retaliation or guerrilla, or proposed as incentives to the producer, and one or more of the dimensions of the matrices is played upon so that it stands out and it persuades the producer that the negotiation feasible area is as indicated by the retailer. The negotiation goal is not quantified into a hard number, but rather in terms of composite objectives, recalling the feasible negotiation area delineated by the methodology.

From the analysis conducted it appears that the dealer concentrated on a relatively reduced set of variables in order to set up and frame a system of conceptual spaces which jointly point to the negotiation feasible area, that is the area within which an agreement with the producer could be acceptable. This is attained by the retailer through the construction of a set of matrices whereby it mapped the position of the producer relative to that of its competitors, both for what concerns variables or contractual conditions concerning directly the producer and the dealer, and for what concerns the average values of the same variables at an aggregate national level. The producer is thus faced with conflict resolution areas, and is guided in understanding the rationale behind the setting of their boundaries, as well as of retaliation prospects. This seems to point to a confrontational approach to the negotiation, whereby the producer is presented with negotiation areas, rather than with optimal, closed-ended numerical objectives. Such finding agrees with research findings which suggest that a problem solving approach, as opposed to an aggressive or a compromising one, is the one that leads to a higher satisfaction on both parts, which is the line to be expected in the case of annual contracts, which usually concern long term relationships¹⁸. Moreover, it also matches with research findings by which a retailer evaluates competing contractual offers based on his merchandise requirements and the product/supplier performance, thus evaluating offers on the base of a restricted number of variables: "Most retail buyers are buying many products and operating in a pressured work environment with little time available to evaluate,

¹⁸ Ganesan 1993.

in a formal way, detailed and subtle criteria"¹⁹; rather, they focus on few, simple criteria such as the ones here discussed. The negotiation preparation is thus responding to cognitive efficiency and time efficiency criteria which mirror results from research on negotiation results. It is interesting to note how the representation chosen by the retailer studied also conforms to principles of cognitive efficiency²⁰, since it reflects the 3,5D principle of vision and representation, whereby complex, multidimensional representations are better dealt with by construing them around one redundant variable that links one level of representation to the others (here, the redundant variable is market share).

5. Conclusion

It seems to the writer that instead of generating lists of buying criteria, there is reason for research in focusing on understanding how the variables are utilized and built into negotiation strategies, and on the role of negotiation strategies' building in the negotiation process itself, in order to increase the explanatory power of research in RBB. The existing gap in academic literature on RBB concerns both annual contracts issues, and negotiation construction and preparation ones. This paper has tried to explore both issues using the lens of cognitive semantics, in order to highlight the devices by which a negotiation strategy is concocted by the retailer, before it gets to the negotiation table. The case taken into account has shown that preparing for negotiation can be a simple but systematic process. Obviously the tentative nature of this preliminary study calls for future research and especially for extension of the case base. Future research might be directed at an intensive analysis of negotiation preparation features of retailers, and particularly so for annual contracts, since the latter settle a fair share of the performance potential of a retailer, a fact of which retailers are all too aware. This area of research might therefore be both useful in bridging a gap in research, and of interest for practitioners, since it might unveil conditions and links among variables such as performance, satisfaction and relation-nurturing for both negotiating parties. Another direction might be towards analysing both the preparation phase to the negotiation, and the negotiation itself in its progress, in order to highlight possible lines for better preparing negotiation, or better conducting it. An analysis of how producers prepare for annual contracts negotiations should also be envisaged.

The cue for practitioners lies in that preparing for negotiation can be a rational process, and it can be geared not only to goal-setting, as is most often the case, but also to shaping the negotiation in a favourable, more controllable way, which ultimately leads to a superior performance²¹. In turn, linking negotiation performance and negotiation process with the retailer organizational performance might help in monitoring both ex ante and ex post the performance of each supplier relationship and of the retailer itself at large.

¹⁹ Shaw, Dawson & Blair 1992, p.129.

²⁰ Marr, 1982.

²¹ Peterson, Lucas 2001.

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