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Faculdade de Economia e Gestão

The Impact of Channel Conflict on Channel Efficiency

The case of Portuguese Water Heaters Producers
and Distributors

Trabalho de Projeto

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to examine the relationship between channel conflict and channel efficiency. For that purpose this paper compares the early distribution literature and the industrial network approach. The research strategy adopted is action research, including participant observation by the author. In addition, direct intervention was taken from the parties involved (producer, wholesalers and retailers) in order to present some facts and considerations to the phenomena under study. This paper endeavors to provide a contribution to the theory of channel distribution, as it presents an attempt to investigate channel conflict theories applied to the distribution channel of water producers. It attempts to offer a contribution to the study of channel efficiency, as it delivers, based on the literature review, some ideas to a producer that has to manage, on a daily basis, the efficiency of its channel distribution.

Keywords: Channel conflict; channel efficiency; action research; water heaters distribution

1. Introduction

Recent research suggests that channel conflict has impact on channel efficiency. Much work has been carried out to determine the constructs and mechanisms that make up the relationship between producers and distributors.

The study aims to find out how decision makers can contribute to a better efficiency in channels of distribution. In this context, channel partners serve as intermediaries in the flow of the primary offering from producer to end consumers. In addition, this study addresses the contribution of the producer to the management and efficiency of the channel.

Following the future research suggested by Sá Vinhas et al (2010) we will try to go deeper on the study of how can producers manage channel conflict within the channel network. Over the period of gathering information for the development of the theoretical framework, were detected distinct opinions on what should be adequate for this company to have as a distribution channel for its products. The systematization of several studies conducted by expert authors in these areas points to the need of exploring new means of distributing in the current market.

From this study new findings arise for decision makers concerning marketing channels in order to improve the efficiency of this kind of channel of distribution. These reasons led to a reflection on the process of distribution, particularly in the industry in which the organization is acting. We came to the conclusion that it is useful to identify the profile of the distributor that better suits the goals of the producer to delineate the optimal distribution channel fundamental to its efficiency.

We are going to specify the problem from the standpoint of research, contextualizing the study and its goals, presenting the subject under study. Then will go up to the presentation of the theoretical framework which will show

points defended by internationally renowned authors. We are also going to present the methodology of the research as well as the techniques for collecting and analyzing data. The limitations encountered during its progress and issues for future research arising from this study will also be discussed here.

The paper is outlined as follows. The next two sections present a literature review. First, we present the literature review about the channel efficiency and the channel conflict. Afterwards, we compare the approach of the channel groups within the network industry approach of the distribution channels and the main dimensions of a company's channel design and its management. Following this literature review, the research method and findings are presented. Subsequently, a discussion is provided, in which the management of the studied producer's channel distribution must be proactive for the channel conflict to be manageable. The conclusions suggest future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Channel efficiency

According to the American Marketing Association, channel efficiency is one channel performance dimension focusing on how well the firm minimizes costs associated with performing necessary channel functions. Inside these functions, channel members are the main actors. They are interdependent entities involved in performing multiple activities, processes and tasks, in order to provide services or products to consumption (Rosenberg, 1974). This process includes producers, wholesalers and/or retailers with the final goal of satisfying the end consumers in the market (Coughlan et al., 2007).

Defining the most appropriate route for the product, taking in consideration the market, the costs of the chosen channel, product, profit potential, the channel

structure, the life cycle of the product and other factors is essential (Jobber and Lancaster, 2006). It is also important to consider that consumers' preference for some products and services have an impact on the subjects related to distribution channel management (Frazier, 1999).

The distribution channel is one of the elements of the marketing mix where is more difficult to make changes, resulting from this the importance in selecting a suitable network of intermediaries (Kotler, 2010). A distribution channel exists in order to pursue economic interests, but not only due to this fact because, competition does not only occur between the organizations. It may also occur between the existing channels (Rosenberg and Stern, 1971) and incorporate the inter-organizational social aspects from where may appear any compartmental conflict dimension, which must be duly managed not to provoke negative effects on the global performance of the channel (Rosenbloom, 1973, 2004; Singh, 2006).

The channel analyzed follows the distribution through intermediaries. We are talking about markets for intermediate consumption, characterized by a number of specificities that mark the difference compared to the end consumer markets (Lindon et al., 2000). The number of potential customers is lower, but the transactions are of a higher value (Jobber and Lancaster, 2006).

In this kind of distribution, wholesalers and retailers have a key role to producers since both enjoy their knowledge, skills and market positioning to provide efficient access to a large group of companies. The intermediaries, due to their role in other companies and to other businesses, create value for both parties creating a separation in the network between producers and end consumers (Ford, 1998).

Producers can consider the intermediaries as partners and develop a partnership to construct and develop a set of mutual interests. Thus, producers and distributors can recognize the importance and the contribution of each one for the channel efficiency. Both have the possibilities to coordinate efforts to improve the satisfaction and the

requirements of end consumers (Anderson et al., 2009) and achieve the best channel efficiency possible.

The better inputs and resources, that may include every aspect necessary to the channel and to achieve the proposed goals to the channel, generate the better outputs and vice versa. The producer characterized by being an external resource and the organizations involved share a commitment to each other. External resources are as important as internal ones, which presuppose lasting long term relations that take years to consolidate.

Those channels involve behavioral systems between organizations that must operate in an integrated way, creating synergy in search of efficiency and competitiveness (Rosenberg and Stern, 1971). In order to improve the efficiency, the producer has to choose the right partners to the different levels of the channel. It depends on varying factors, especially the type of company structure and typology of the products and/or services; hence the origin of its customers is different.

In the studied distribution channel the essential ingredient to support the delivery of the goods to the end consumers is based on the distributors as partners. It is intended to create a partnership relationship.

Figure 1

Criteria for distribution partners



Source: Homburg et al, 2012

According to Gummesson (1997) a distribution channel requires:

- The relationship - marketing should be geared towards creating, maintaining and developing relationships with customers (in this case, distributors as customers);
- Interactivity of the parties - the relationship between producers and distributors create mutual value delivery and require a narrow and intense communication process between them;
- The long term - a long timeline to create, maintain and develop relationships is needed (Antunes, 2008).

Whenever a producer wants more than one transaction, it should focus on two aspects, namely the management of the opportunity that presents itself immediately, and ensure a favorable behavior for the future of the relationship (Anderson et al., 2009).

2.2. Channel conflict

According to Coughlan et al. (2006), channel conflict is a state of opposition, or discord, among the organizations comprising a marketing channel. We can find in the marketing literature examples that conflict is present in the channels of distribution, and that this conflict influences the channel efficiency (Rosenberg, 1974; Frazier, 1999; Sá Vinhas et al., 2010; Cunningham, 2013). But not much findings of their real impact on organizations; this point, has received little attention (Singh, 2006).

According to Coughlan et al. (2006) the main reasons of conflict appearance are:

- Disagreement in purposes of the channel's members;
- Disagreement in the point of policy;
- Disparity in conceptions of existing situation.

Analyzing conflict, its causes and effects as well as the means to solve it and, as conflict is not commonly predicted, what we realize is that the intervenient usually only reacts to it, when is already a fact (Rosenberg, 1974). As Gudonavičienė (2008) states, there should exist some kind of an alarm as an advance warning system in the channels for conflicts.

Channel conflict can be analyzed from two different perspectives: externally and internally (Cunningham, 2013). The Internal conflict is related with the structure and the key groups belonging to a single channel member and how they can cause conflict between organizations. Externally, following the path of the product, from the producer, passing it along the channel members, wholesalers and retailers, to allow a consumer to purchase it, the same author refers that although this process of distribution looks simple there are a lot of possibilities to develop conflict in this distribution path.

Conflict can have a positive, negative or neutral effect on the channel efficiency and conflict is sometimes a sign of a growing efficiency showing a channel working on a regular basis, fulfilling its general goals, also meaning that the functions of the channel are running properly (Coughlan et al., 2006). Therefore, efficiency is a goal for conflict management process that may contribute to the success of a long term relationship between the stakeholders.

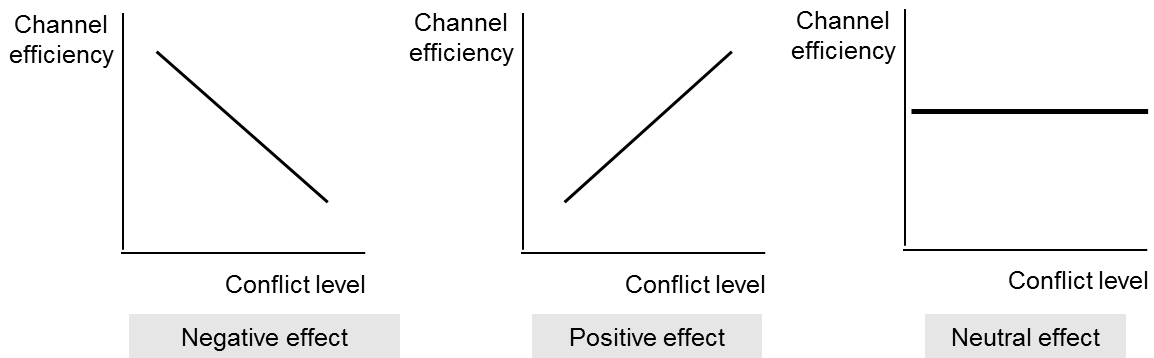
We realize that at different levels, downstream and upstream, conflict occurs, and it can be positive or harmful to channel relationships and channel efficiency (Dixon and Layton, 1971, cited by Rosenbloom, 1973; Spring, 2006, cited in Cunningham, 2013).

Following Cunningham (2013), the sources of conflict could begin at the producer (internal conflict), inside his structure (marketing, supply chain, R&D, among others), that may result from too many products to introduce to the market, too many price changes, distribution bypass to the retailers without selling to the wholesaler, pushing products, among others. From the point of view of the wholesaler, the geographic distribution of point of sales from the producer, late deliveries, or products that are wrong or damaged when delivered and bypass to retailers, are among the common complaints.

The sources of conflict observed from the point of view of the retailers are, among others, the lack of support from the producers and the price and margin disparities since the producers are selling through wholesalers.

Figure 3

Effect of conflict on marketing channel efficiency



Source: Adapted by the author, from Rosenbloom, 2004

As we could see in Figure 3, conflict can assume an important part in the channel efficiency. Frazier (1999) states that an increase in levels of conflict may lead to an increased performance in the channel, and Rosenbloom (1973) argues that it even can impact on the re-evaluation of the effective channel policies, as channel efficiency can be one of the criterions to evaluate the whole channel. This term also treats the total of investment in the various inputs and resource allocation in the organizations, as man power/time, frequency of visits in the field, quality of resources, deciding which promotion, which training, among others.

It is a common belief that conflict has a negative impact on channel efficiency (Rosenbloom, 1973). In general, conflict is perceived as being harmful to the relationships inside the channel and to its performance. But conflict can assume various forms on the impact it has on channel efficiency, being positive, negative or neutral.

As a common example, following Rosenbloom (1973), some pressure from the producer to a wholesaler that is not selling what the producer desires can cause conflict. What happens after can increase, decrease or have no effect on channel efficiency. The wholesaler can reflect on what he has been told, and think that he can make an effort to sell more. In this case, it is good for the producer. Conflict might serve as an impetus for either or both of the channel members to reappraise their

respective policies. The attitudes following conflict situations will determine if the effect is positive, negative or neutral.

It is important not to eliminate all the causes of conflicts, but how to deal with it in a more efficient way, turning the decisions from each company acceptable to all the channel members (Gudonaviciene 2008). Therefore, it is important to try not so much how to completely eliminate the causes of conflicts, but how to deal with them more efficiently. As according to this attitude, it is very important to seek that the main aims of a company would be acceptable to all participants of a marketing channel.

Figure 4 shows some strategies that may help prevent and resolve conflicts, both internally and externally.

Figure 4
Conflict resolution strategies

| Strategies for Success | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Internal | External |
| Better communication | Better communication |
| Cross functional teams | Business planning process |
| Overall respect for each function | Clear goals and expectations |
| Common incentive plan | Understanding of performance metrics |
| Cross functional training and development | Defined roles and responsibilities |

Source: Cunningham, 2013

2.3. Early distribution literature and the industrial network approach

According to the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP Group), the pioneers in the study of distribution classified all business activities in three main categories: extractive, manufacturing and distributive (Sparling, 1917). The same author defined marketing as the commercial processes concerned with the

distribution of raw material of production and finished output of the factory. During the years the definition of marketing has been changing. Since the 1950's several authors suggested two different approaches. The systemic approach presented by Wroe Alderson, who made the study of marketing and distribution scientific, and others, is going to influence the current industrial network thinking.

Regarding the global interpretation of the business exchanges, the two schools of thought present similarities (Gadde and Ford, 2008):

- The “channel groups” identified by Alderson’s is the notion used of synergetic network effects in contemporary network modeling.
- A channel cannot be designed by a (single) actor since there are numerous connections between a huge numbers of firms. Both gained the understanding of what happens beyond the analysis of a single channel member.
- When it comes to the role of adaptations and the idea that various configurations of activities and division of labour will provide diverse utilities and economic outcome, Alderson’s adds a systemic analysis of channel dynamics. This is because it seems to be an underlying assumption that various type of sorting is best performed by one particular institutional level (wholesale, retail, etc.).
- Concerning the role of control between channel members, both approaches give it much importance due to its impact on efficiency.
- Both literatures share, at least implicitly, that internal and external evolution is as much a function of unplanned events as it is of analysis and strategy.

Concerning the global interpretation of the business exchanges of the two schools of thought, to the same authors, the differences reside in the following points of view:

- In the relationships between actors the channel literature concentrated on conflict themes between channel members, whereas the network approach emphasizes cooperation, complementarity and coordination. (Easton, 1992 cited by Gadde and Ford, 2008). Mainstream literature treats conflict as a main issue as part of disagreement resolutions. The network approach follows the collaborative issues around business behavior. But, this difference has been fading during the years due to the growing importance of the costs associated with cooperation and close relationships.
- The early channel literature sees the distribution channel as a simple line that exists between producers and end consumers but taking in consideration that competitors do exist. The network literature mentions the importance of all the connections between channel members, even the ones that are not easily perceivable.

It is important to refer that the early channel literature evolves during an era of mass production when the main concern of the producer was to establish fast and efficient channels to provide satisfaction to their intermediaries. On the other hand, the network literature developed in a period less stable, with a lot of new companies, with new type of offerings, less strongly based on physical products. In this new era of postponement and flexibility the products are going to be distributed (and manufactured) according to the demand (Mintzberg, 1996 cited by Gadde and Ford, 2008). The evolving IMP network literature indicates a strong orientation towards externalization taking the advantages of interactions between different organizations.

3. Method

3.1. Research Setting

Our research focused on the distribution channel comprising Portuguese water heaters producers. The research setting is characterized by an unclear and not very well defined sales structure from the channel members. The studied distribution channel is classified as a vertical system of contractual distribution, where the producer is the leader of the channel.

In this channel of distribution we analyzed the relationships at three levels of its structure: the producer, the wholesaler, which is the first intermediary and that distributes to the retailers; and the retailers, that are buying from the wholesaler and, sometimes, from the producer directly.

We aimed to identify the actions or mechanisms that could be adopted by the producers in the distribution channel in study, to manage conflicts that impact negatively on its efficiency, with a focus on its causes. In this context, we wanted to explore the main issues causing conflicts between the channel partners, to estimate the relevance and the effect of those conflicts on the efficiency of the channel.

3.2. Sample and data collection

The research followed an active approach. Both the producer and the researcher worked together, allowing the research to intervene and interview the wholesalers and retailers that are already partners, and some others that could be chosen to be in the near future. The logic implicit in this study aimed to seize the efficiency of the distribution channel.

We asked a set of questions to five managers of the top five wholesalers in the Portuguese market and to ten managers of retailers that represent this kind of products in the mentioned market. Three of the wholesalers and six of the retailers

are already buying, or bought at some time, this kind of products. The other ones may be part of the network as potential distributors in the near future. Therefore, the research strategy chosen for this research was action research (Reason, 2006), during the period of analysis.

The methodology outlined in this paper addresses qualitative aspects, having a defined temporal dimension, during the year of 2013. In this context, Gummesson (2006) claims that a qualitative approach is superior to a quantitative one due to the possibility of the non-linear aspects of the studied case becoming more visible in this way. It is easier to analyze the complexity, the context and the effect of behavioral characteristics of the participants through a holistic vision.

The instruments for data collection refer to the various meetings held with the managers of the distributing organizations and from the producer, and the analysis of documents that were provided to us by the same producer. The empirical research has been carried out limited to the previous mentioned data collection methods. The analysis of data collected during the research process is critical to achieving the goals outlined; it is at this point that the critical and reflective capacities of the researcher contribute to a perception of the object of study.

Due to first impressions from the field we presumed some assumptions as previous indicators to the questions that were going to be done to the stakeholders as an attempt to anticipate the possible outcomes of the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Malhotra, 2007). In particular, we assumed that conflict exists in the relationships between organizations in the distribution channel in study, and that there may be some dissatisfaction among the members of the distribution channel that can originate conflict. We also assumed that conflict has a negative effect on the channel efficiency and it is considered that if viable management actions or mechanisms are implemented they will lead to a better channel efficiency.

The questions made to the producer were:

- 1) Do you consider your distribution network appropriate?
- 2) In order to improve the efficiency of the distribution channel, which measures do you consider important to be implemented?
- 3) Do you consider important the classification of the distributors based on certain criteria such as turnover, territorial presence or opening for training?

The questions made to the wholesalers and retailers were as follows:

- 1) Do you consider that the producer gives your company the best conditions to do business? What support is missing from the producers in general in this relationship?
- 2) What conflicts do you think exist in the distribution channel, between distributors and producers? What do you consider to be their sources?
- 3) How would you prevent them?

Taking into account the data collection instruments used in this research, we have chosen for content analysis and triangulation of data resulting from various information obtained from various sources and stakeholders resulting from our direct intervention in the market where the organization operates.

Due to the nature of this study we used content analysis to better understand the components of research. Content analysis, according to Bardin (2001) is defined as a set of technique analysis for communications, aiming for systematic and objective procedures to describe the content of the messages, to obtain quantitative indicators, or not, allowing the inference of knowledge on the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of the messages. The author characterizes

content analysis as the interpretation of communication by the content of messages sent.

In order to analyze the problem presented, our intervention in the producer consisted of:

- 1) Creating a plan for the development of a structured network of nationwide distribution resale relying on companies holding expertise in the heating area;
- 2) Developing an action to solve a specific problem through action research (Kemmis, 1998) and enabling dialogue throughout the research, evaluation of processes (Stenhouse et al., 1997) and corrections during the process (Saunders, 2003).

By its nature, action research requires a revision, improvement and redefinition of the problem because, in practice, the plan will suffer changes over time (Kuhne and Quigley, 1997). In this study, the channel members reflect on the need for change in the industry and their opinions and critical analysis are used to monitor, evaluate and decide in which direction the process of action research should follow (Ainscow, 2000). The nature of this study is descriptive (Saunders, 2003) as it seeks to examine the facts, with the direct involvement of the management of the producer in this implementation.

4. Discussion, analysis and results

The desired result for this research would be to present some findings to this distribution channel, through a process of managing accounts and activities by the producer. According to Bardin (2001), we conducted individual interviews to the managers of the wholesalers and retailers throughout 2013, followed by content analysis techniques, giving representation in the research process. Arrived here, and after an exhaustive content analysis of the responses and after making a deep review

of the documents and data that we were being provided, it is time to present them classified in the literary frame initially presented.

4.1. The producer side

To the question “Do you consider your distribution network appropriate?” the producer feels the need to better understand the distribution channel as a whole, and more specifically its members. A classification from the distributors is needed, helped by a planning tool in order to take advantage of the conflict issues pointed out by the other channel members, wholesalers and retailers. It was referred that they deal with too many different type of distributors, with too many price lists to them all, causing internal problems in the commercial department. They also referred that they would like to have a bigger penetration in the top five wholesalers nationwide and that is important at this time to redesign the distribution network.

To the question “In order to improve the efficiency of the distribution channel, which measures do you consider important to be implemented?” the producer finds important to develop a plan, managing accounts, with the objective of creating long term relationships with the distributors. For that, they recognize that a general and massive marketing plan treating all the distributors the same way will not be appropriate, and they are also aware that selling to small retailers bypassing the wholesalers has been causing some external conflicts difficult to manage with the top ten Portuguese wholesalers.

To the question “Do you consider important the classification of the distributors based on certain criteria such as turnover, territorial presence or opening for training?” the producer says that is important to make a classification of distributors, helped by a planning tool, in order to take advantage of the conflict issues pointed out by the other channel members, wholesalers and retailers.

4.2. The distributor side

For the question “Do you consider that the producer gives your company the best conditions to do business? What is missing or could be better from the producers in general in this relationship?” the usual complaint is about discounts and sales conditions that could be better. In general they state they need a better customer service, before the sale and aftersales. Not so much the frequency of visits from the part of the salesmen but, the idea is that the producers should provide their distributors with the right tools. This complaint is more visible in the small retailers; the ones further away in the distribution channel receive less attention from the customer service support. This is also applicable to the lack of training.

To the question “What conflicts do you think exist in the distribution channel, between distributors and producers? What do you consider to be their sources?” Wholesalers and retailers mentioned that sometimes, producers present new pricelists with better discounts to competing distributors without taking in consideration the history of the relationship.

A wholesaler stated: “we stopped buying from the producer because we found out they were doing a better price on another wholesaler. Since we pay all the invoices and do not complain on discounts, they felt no need to improve the conditions of purchase as well”.

It is also a common complaint between wholesalers that the producers are bypassing them selling their products directly to small retailers. A wholesaler stated: “The producer sells to everyone, they do not respect the channel, they bypass the wholesaler and sell directly to small retailers, some of them my customers”.

On the other hand, some retailers complain that the producers should sell them directly because wholesalers, as intermediaries, are selling the products too expensive providing the retailers with a small margin to operate in the market. To

this point, the wholesalers reply that they have huge costs with bigger structures than the ones from the small retailers.

A retailer stated: “the producer pays all the attention to the wholesaler. I do not receive brochures and never had samples free-of-charge”.

To the question “How would you prevent them?” Common sense was mentioned by the majority of the managers. Issues like receivables, stock, and introduction of new products, acceptance of guarantees, lack of resources, disagreements and general differences in perception could be avoided with a better communication process between managers from the distribution channel.

Figure 5 indicates some sources of conflict detected.

Figure 5

Main topics of conflict mentioned in responses to the interview guide

| Sources of conflict from the point of view of the producers | Sources of conflict from the point of view of the wholesalers | Sources of conflict from the point of view of the retailers |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Small stock from the distributors</p> <p>Selling competitors and other businesses</p> <p>No acceptance to training</p> | <p>Prices</p> <p>Lack of support from salesmen</p> <p>Bypass to retailers</p> | <p>Lack of support from salesmen</p> <p>Sales through wholesalers (margin)</p> <p>Prices from wholesaler</p> |

Source: Elaborated by the author

What was said in the responses shows that the conflict can exist in a latent or manifest way in the distribution channel, confirming the accepted theories that conflict is intrinsic to the relationships existing in distribution channels (Pondy, 1967; Rosenberg and Stern, 1971; Rosenbloom, 2004; Coughlan et al., 2006; Singh, 2006; Kotler and Keller, 2009).

5. Conclusions

Regarding what was said in the literature review about marketing channels and indirect channel of distribution, the results of this study demonstrate that the key factor for the producer is the management of the distribution channel based on the implementation of a plan.

Concerning the impact of conflict in the channel efficiency, the results show that for the producer, taking in consideration that its products only can be sold through intermediaries, the conflict management down the channel assumes a vital importance to the survival of this company. The products from the producer can be easily replaced by the same type of products by another producer. The channel efficiency, if that occurs, is not harmed, the product still arrives to the end consumer.

The results from this research should not be generalized but can be useful to managers that are beginning new relationships or maintaining and consolidating old ones.

From the point of view of the producer it is important to refer that conflicts can impact more negatively to the efficiency of this company than to the whole channel. The existing conflicts in this channel do not have a negative impact on its efficiency. It can be neutral or even positive. Neutral if the producer is replaced by another one with the same offer, positive if the members of the channel rethink their actions and ideas due to conflicts improving the channel efficiency.

The findings in this study, while based on theoretical considerations are bounded by the limited empirical evidence. It is recommended that more research be devoted to the issues surrounding the management of conflict and the impact on the efficiency of individual actors of the channel.

We consider important for the producer the creation of a management plan to develop a structured network of nationwide distribution, a distribution relying on

companies holding expertise in the respective industry and not in the indiscriminate sale.

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