

"SILENT SELLER" IN BUSINESS PRACTICE: PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS BASED ON THE FMCG INDUSTRY

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Purpose: Based on preliminary empirical research results, the study examined the assumption that a typical customer of large-format stores in the FMCG sector is susceptible to the influence of merchandising. The conducted study, involving 97 respondents and 3 industry leaders, aimed to define the specifics of merchandising activities in the context of improving the shopping process for the average consumer.

Design/methodology/approach: Two research tools were used in the study: a survey questionnaire and an interview questionnaire. The survey was directed at customers of all age groups who use large-format stores specializing in the FMCG sector across Poland. Meanwhile, the interviews were conducted with employees of a company operating within the FMCG sector.

Findings: The findings indicate that customers of large-format FMCG stores are aware of the impact of merchandising and can accurately define their needs and expectations regarding these retail outlets.

Research limitations/implications: Due to the small sample size and its specific nature, as well as the scope of the conducted analyses, the obtained results should not be regarded as definitive and conclusive. Future research should focus on a more in-depth and extensive exploration of this issue.

Practical implications: The practical objective of this study is to identify which specific merchandising activities in the FMCG sector most effectively influence consumers.

Originality/value: This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the essence of commercial merchandising in the FMCG sector. The publication is intended primarily for researchers but is also relevant to entrepreneurs, managers, and marketing professionals. The data presented may be useful both in academic contexts and in business practice.

Keywords: "Silent Seller", merchandising, FMCG industry.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Merchandising in Poland has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from the era of a centrally planned economy - characterized by poorly equipped stores and a limited selection - to the present-day ubiquity of merchandising techniques, introduced with the arrival of large international retail chains after the political and economic transformation. Despite increasing consumer awareness of these practices, merchandising continues to spark discussions, often being mistakenly perceived as manipulation, whereas, in reality, it aims to enhance the shopping experience. This dynamic transformation and the growing complexity of the market have led to the increasing importance of merchandising in both research and business practice in recent years. It has become a subject of numerous academic discussions, as reflected in the rising number of publications in national and international scientific journals (e.g. Matysik-Pejas, Pakosz, 2013; Ha-Brookshire, 2015; Werenowska, 2015; Batko, 2021; Karabıyık, Elgün, 2021; Barreleta et al., 2023; Stoica, 2023). It is also a real challenge faced by managers in organizational practice. From the author's perspective, the issue of merchandising is particularly relevant to the FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) industry. The modern FMCG market is characterized by intense competition, making effective merchandising management in retail outlets extremely demanding and complex. A particular challenge arises from the abundance of product substitutes and the fact that many customers make their final brand selection decision only at the point of sale. For this reason, well-thought-out merchandising strategies are crucial for stimulating sales and ensuring customer satisfaction by enabling them to quickly and conveniently find the products they are looking for. However, despite the growing conviction among professionals about the critical role of merchandising in contemporary organizations, there are still many aspects that warrant further investigation. This study aims to fill the gap in strategic awareness regarding the role of merchandising and the importance of developing an effective sales policy in this sector. A thorough analysis of research findings will provide a better understanding of the essence of merchandising in large-format FMCG stores and its most effective aspects in influencing customer behavior.

2. Merchandising in the Context of Definitional Dilemmas

In Poland, the first mentions of merchandising appeared in the early 1990s. At that time, the main challenge was the low awareness of the term's meaning. There was no clear definition, and merchandisers struggled to precisely define their role. A decade later, the situation changed significantly. Manufacturers and retail chain managers began to recognize the importance of promotional activities at the point of sale. Additionally, dynamic market changes, such as

a 50% increase in the number of supermarkets and a threefold rise in hypermarkets between 2000 and 2004, contributed to the development of merchandising. Small stores of less than 100 m² were gradually pushed out of the market, and more than 66% of Polish consumers started shopping in hypermarkets or large shopping centers (Buczyk, Kliniewicz, 2024), further accelerating the industry's growth. Although customers' shopping preferences have evolved over the years, recent survey data commissioned by Cushman & Wakefield indicate a shift in consumer habits. Currently, 66% of Poles prefer small, local stores close to home primarily for convenience, while 62% choose discount stores for larger grocery purchases exceeding PLN 100 (Cushman, Wakefield, 2024). Despite these changing preferences, merchandising activities continue to gain significance.

The term "merchandising" has no direct equivalent in Polish. In Poland, the original English term is commonly used, although it can be translated as "goods for sale" or simply "merchandise". The literal translation, "merchandising", also conveys the concept, though it is not widely adopted (Witek, 2007). The increasing recognition of merchandising's impact on a company's competitiveness and operational efficiency has led to a growing body of publications and research in this field. However, the available literature remains diverse, complex, and multidimensional, making it challenging to standardize definitions. The primary difficulty lies in defining the key term and reaching even partial agreement on its interpretation.

Merchandising is a broad and evolving concept, with definitions that have shifted alongside market developments. Nevertheless, the operationalization of the concept based on the analysis of source literature includes two main approaches (Table 1). The first approach, known as the narrow approach, focuses on the visual aspects of product display in the store, i.e., visual merchandising. The second approach, the broad one, considers merchandising as an integral part of the company's broader marketing strategy, known as primary merchandising.

Table 1.
Two Approaches to Defining Merchandising: Selected Interpretations

Author	Definition
Narrow approach	
Mills, Paul, Moorman	Visual merchandising is the presentation of a store or brand and its merchandise to customers through the collaboration of the store's advertising, display, special events, fashion coordination, and merchandising departments, with the goal of selling the goods and services offered.
Diamond, Diamond	Visual merchandising is the presentation of a store and its merchandise in a way that captures the attention of potential customers and motivates them to make a purchase.
Kotler, Armstrong	Visual merchandising is the art of designing attractive and functional in-store arrangements that draw customers' attention and encourage them to buy. A key aspect of this process is the strategic use of space, lighting, and color to create a welcoming and engaging shopping environment.

Cont. table 1.

Broad approach	
Borusiak	Merchandising encompasses all activities carried out by hypermarkets, supermarkets, and manufacturers at the point of sale to promote products and distinguish specific items from the overall assortment.
Drab	Merchandising is an integral part of retail marketing activities and a crucial element of effective product management at the point of sale.
Rojewska	Merchandising is a strategic approach to product presentation and sales, which can determine the success or failure of a commercial enterprise.

Source: own elaboration based on (Mills et al., 1995; Diamond, J. Diamond, E., 2007; Kotler, Armstrong, 2017; Borusiak, 2008; Drab, 2010; Rojewska, 2024).

A systematic literature review indicates that existing studies range from detailed analyses based on the narrow approach (e.g. Bandara, 2021; Dhillon et al., 2024; Gajewska, Piskrzynska, 2016; Gigola, 2016; Mardani, Krisnawati, 2022; Mehta, Chugan, 2012) to broader examinations of merchandising strategies (e.g. Batko, 2021; Konštiak et al., 2016; Nikolaeva, Kotov, 2023; Paramonov, Berketova, 2023; Piotrowska, 2012; Smith, 2021; Tarczydło, 2016; Wu et al., 2022).

For the purposes of this study, merchandising is defined as point-of-sale activities undertaken by retailers and manufacturers to promote and differentiate products within the overall product range.

3. Merchandising Strategies and Tools vs. Customer Experience

The general definition of a merchandising strategy is based on knowledge from retail marketing and sales management, encompassing various activities aimed at promoting products at points of sale. This definition includes key elements of merchandising, such as product presentation in stores, assortment management, pricing and promotional strategies, customer communication through packaging and labeling, and the analysis of sales data and customer behavior to optimize the strategy (Cyrek Digital, 2023). Understood in this way, a merchandising strategy is implemented both through long-term strategic plans that set the overall direction of store operations (Harvard Business Review, 2023) and through ongoing operational activities that ensure the effective execution of these plans in daily retail practice (Dawson et al., 2008).

The choice of a merchandising strategy depends on various factors related to the retail establishment, market, supplier, manufacturer, and the product itself (Rzemieniak, 2006). Based on this, different types of merchandising strategies can be identified:

- Location strategy: selecting the appropriate store location, considering customer profiles and accessibility.
- Assortment strategy: selecting the product range according to market expectations and efficiency.

- Pricing strategies: *off-price*: selling branded products at lower prices (outlets) and *trading-up*: raising product and pricing standards to create an exclusive brand image.
- Service strategies: *hard-selling*: aggressive sales tactics, persuading customers to purchase and *soft-selling*: trust-based sales, providing assistance upon customer request (Chwałek, 1992; Kotra, Pysz-Radziszewska, 2001; Rzemieniak, 2006).

Planning an effective merchandising strategy requires the use of appropriate tools. A review of the literature identifies two approaches to defining the fundamental instruments of merchandising:

- Approach 1: this includes merchandise (assortment and related services), margin (discounts, allowances, profit), technology (sales methods, equipment, location), and promotion (communication with customers and suppliers to increase demand) (Kałużna-Drewińska, Iwankiewicz-Rak, 1997).
- Approach 2: this highlights uniform staff attire, appropriate lighting, sales promotions, proper product display, promotional campaigns, store environment design, staff training, and POS materials (Witek, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, given its empirical nature and focus on examining the impact of merchandising on customers of large-format stores in the FMCG sector, the analysis of merchandising instruments will be conducted based on Approach 2.

Well-thought-out merchandising strategies can attract customers' attention, encourage them to make a purchase, and directly increase sales by stimulating their senses through various experiences:

- Visual - including store color schemes, product shapes and sizes, and color intensity.
- Auditory - related to music, its tempo, and type.
- Olfactory - utilizing different scents and their intensity.
- Gustatory - referring to the taste experiences offered.
- Tactile - linked to the subtlety of textures and the temperature within the store (Witek, 2007).

In summary, well-developed and systematically implemented merchandising plans, combined with appropriately selected instruments, directly influence customers' perception of the store by stimulating their sensory perception and motivating them to make purchases. As a result, conscious management of merchandising activities is fundamental to increasing sales, strengthening customer relationships, and achieving a competitive advantage in the market.

In the following sections of this study, selected theoretical issues presented in sections 2 and 3 will be compared with the results of the conducted empirical research. This will allow for the practical application of key concepts, such as the understanding of merchandising, the identification of merchandising strategies and instruments, as well as sensory impressions, and an assessment of their role in the business realities of the FMCG sector.

4. Presentation of Survey Results

4.1. Survey Methodology

Merchandising plays a fundamental role in sales activation, especially in the competitive FMCG industry. It influences customers on multiple levels, from conscious perception of product displays to subconscious reactions to visual, auditory, and other stimuli. It is a dynamic and evolving tool aimed at increasing profits for retailers and manufacturers while also facilitating the shopping process for customers. The significance of this issue, stemming from the outlined problem, formed the basis for defining the research objectives: cognitive and practical. The cognitive objective focused on the theory and identification of merchandising elements, while the practical objective aimed to apply this knowledge to determine the most effective merchandising strategies influencing consumer purchasing decisions.

To capture the specificity of the issue and achieve the research objectives, a main hypothesis was formulated, assuming that the average customer of large-format FMCG stores is susceptible to merchandising techniques. Additionally, three specific hypotheses were proposed: H1: Customer susceptibility to merchandising techniques occurs at a subconscious level; H2: The key merchandising instruments effectively influencing customer purchasing decisions are proper product placement on shelves and the competence of store personnel; H3: The strongest influence on large-format store customers comes from visual and auditory stimuli.

Achieving these objectives and verifying the hypotheses paved the way for both cognitive and practical insights in the study. To explore this topic further, independent research was conducted in collaboration with Jakub Pękała (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022). The research was carried out using a methodology based on primary research, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative research was conducted through an online survey, which was distributed electronically and shared in online groups, ensuring nationwide reach. The research sample was selected non-randomly, and 97 completed questionnaires were obtained.

4.2. Characteristics of Respondents

The complete profile of the respondents, developed based on the survey's demographic criteria such as gender, age, education, and place of residence, is presented in Table 2.

Tabela 2.
Characteristics of The Surveyed Respondents

Synthetic criterion	Elementary criterion	Wyniki % ogółem
Gender	Woman	55,7%
	Male	44,3%

Cont. table 2.

Age	do 25	44,3%
	25-40	12,4%
	40-60	35,1%
	Powyżej 60	8,2%
Education	Basic	0%
	Professional	1,0%
	Medium	63,9%
	Higher	35,1%
Place of residence	Village	42,3%
	City with up to 20,000 inhabitants	27,8%
	City with 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants	12,4%
	City with 50,000 to 200,000 inhabitants	0%
	City with 200,000 to 500,000 inhabitants	0%
	City with more than 500,000 inhabitants	0%

Source: own graphic design based on (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

Summarizing the characteristics of the respondents participating in the survey, the sample consisted of 97 individuals with a diverse demographic profile in terms of gender, age, education, and place of residence. This diversity provides insight into the opinions of a broad spectrum of customers of large-format stores in the FMCG sector.

4.3. Selected Results of the Quantitative Survey

In response to the multiple-choice question regarding the most frequent grocery shopping locations, discount stores were indicated by the largest group of respondents, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the total (64,9%, $n = 63$). Slightly fewer participants (62,9%, $n = 61$) selected hypermarkets as their preferred shopping destination. Proximity supermarkets were popular among one-quarter of respondents (23,7%, $n = 23$). Meanwhile, fewer than 20% of surveyed individuals chose supermarkets (16,5%, $n = 16$) or convenience stores (14,4%, $n = 14$) as their most frequent grocery shopping locations.

An analysis of responses to the question about the most important factors influencing the choice of a grocery store, conducted using a one-way chi-square test, revealed that the distribution of responses significantly differed from a random pattern [χ^2 (4, $N = 97$) = 65,01; $p < 0.001$]. The most frequently indicated criterion was a wide product assortment ($n = 41$; 42.3% of respondents). Low prices were a key factor for one-third of participants (35.1%, $n = 34$). A good location was important to fewer than one in five respondents (17.5%, $n = 17$). Meanwhile, the options "shopping convenience and intuitiveness" (4.1%, $n = 4$) and "all of the above" (1.0%, $n = 1$) were chosen only sporadically.

An analysis of responses to the question regarding the familiarity with the term "merchandising" among customers of large-format grocery stores revealed that the frequency of responses significantly deviated from a random distribution [χ^2 (1, $N = 97$) = 54,94; $p < 0.001$]. The majority of respondents (87,6%, $n = 85$) confirmed that they had heard of the strategies employed by stores to influence customers' purchasing decisions, referred to as merchandising. Only a small percentage of respondents, accounting for 12,4% ($n = 12$), stated that they were unfamiliar with this term.

Further analyzing the respondents' answers, a chi-square test was conducted to determine which of the provided definitions of merchandising was considered the most accurate. The test results [χ^2 (3, N = 97) = 54,55; $p < 0.001$] showed statistically significant deviations from a random distribution of responses, suggesting clear preferences among participants. The most frequently chosen option, selected by more than half of the respondents (56,7%, $n = 55$), was "activities carried out by stores and manufacturers". Less frequently chosen definitions included: "a struggle between manufacturers" (19,6%, $n = 19$), "influencing the customer" (15,5%, $n = 15$), and "an inseparable element of marketing activities" (8,2%, $n = 8$).

An analysis of responses regarding the awareness of merchandising practices used by stores also revealed a clear trend [χ^2 (1, N = 97) = 67,64; $p < 0.001$]. The vast majority of respondents - nine out of ten (91,8%, $n = 89$) - confirmed that they were aware of such practices being employed by stores. Only a small group, representing one in ten individuals (8,2%, $n = 8$), was unaware of this.

After examining respondents' awareness and definitions of merchandising, the next analysis focused on their opinions regarding the role merchandising plays in grocery stores. A chi-square test clearly showed that the distribution of responses significantly deviated from randomness [χ^2 (4, N = 97) = 89.96; $p < 0.001$], indicating diverse opinions on this issue. The most frequently identified role of merchandising was directly stimulating a company's sales (46,4%, $n = 45$). A significant group of respondents also recognized its function in influencing customer behavior during the shopping process (40,2%, $n = 39$). Less frequently mentioned roles included controlling a company's economic results (8,2%, $n = 8$) and "shaping an appropriate approach to the customer" (4,1%, $n = 4$). One person stated that they had no knowledge of the topic (1, 0%, $n = 1$).

The next step in the study was to examine the merchandising strategies used by grocery stores. To achieve this, respondents were asked which of the presented strategies they believed positively influenced their choice of a specific store and which did not. The analysis, conducted using a two-variable chi-square test, revealed statistically significant differences in the evaluation of strategies [χ^2 (5, N = 97) = 305,49; $p < 0.001$], as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3.

Strategies Positively Influencing Customers' Store Choice (n = 97)

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Store staff providing assistance in product selection only upon the explicit request of the customer	83	85,6%	14	14,4%
Store staff interfering with customers' purchasing decisions	4	4,1%	93	95,9%
A sense of luxury immediately upon entering the store and a wide range of additional services	59	60,8%	38	39,2%
Low prices and a maximized level of self-service	89	91,8%	8	8,2%
Access to all necessary products	92	94,8%	5	5,2%
Convenient store location	92	94,8%	5	5,2%

Source: (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

The analysis of respondents' answers revealed which merchandising strategies are perceived positively and which negatively in terms of grocery store selection. The positively rated merchandising strategies include:

- Assistance from store staff, but only upon the explicit request of the customer – as many as 85,6% of respondents considered this strategy to have a positive impact on their store choice.
- Offering low prices and ensuring a high level of self-service – 91,8% of respondents identified this strategy as positive.
- Providing access to all necessary products, which received a 94,8% positive rating from respondents.
- Convenient store location, also positively rated by 94,8% of respondents.
- Creating a sense of luxury at the store entrance and offering a wide range of additional services, which 60,8% of respondents viewed positively.

The only strategy that was negatively rated by the vast majority of respondents (95,9%) was store staff interfering with customers' purchasing decisions.

Continuing the analysis of the impact of merchandising on customers, the next stage compared respondents' answers regarding which of the listed merchandising instruments they considered the most important during the shopping process. To identify any statistically significant differences in the importance of individual instruments, the Friedman rank ANOVA test was applied (Table 4).

Table 4.

Which of the Following Instruments Do You Consider Most Important During the Purchasing Process?

	Group	Mdn	Mrang
I	Spotlighting on products	0	3,95
II	Promotions	1	5,84
III	Product placement on shelves	0	4,50
IV	Seasonal promotional campaigns	0	4,48
V	Pleasant store atmosphere	0	4,98
VI	Competent store staff	1	5,27
VII	In-store informational materials (POS)	0	3,30
VIII	Impulse purchases	0	3,68
$\chi^2(7)$	110,26**		
p	< 0,001		
Post-hoc	I < II; I < VI; III < II; IV < II; VII < II; VII < III; VII < IV; VII < V; VII < VI; VIII < II; VIII < V; VIII < VI;		

Source: (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

A statistical analysis of the respondents' answers revealed significant differences in the perception of the importance of various merchandising instruments during shopping [$\chi^2(7) = 110,26$; $p < 0.001$]. The study results indicate that spotlighting products is considered less important in the shopping process compared to promotions and competent store staff. Similarly, product placement on shelves was perceived as less significant than available

promotions. It was also found that seasonal promotional campaigns are regarded as less important than regular promotions. Moreover, in-store informational materials (POS) were deemed by respondents to play a smaller role than promotions, product placement, seasonal promotions, a pleasant store atmosphere, and staff professionalism. Additionally, the study revealed that impulse purchases hold less significance than promotions, positive shopping experiences related to store ambiance, and staff competence (Table 5).

Table 5.

Descriptive Statistics of the Importance of Individual Instruments in the Purchasing Process (n = 97)

	R	M	SD	Mdn	Sk	Kurt	W
Spotlighting on products	0-3	0,48	1,02	0	1,84	1,70	0,51**
Promotions	0-3	1,12	0,83	1	0,98	0,78	0,75**
Product placement on shelves	0-3	0,78	1,18	0	1,01	-0,74	0,65**
Seasonal promotional campaigns	0-3	0,76	1,15	0	1,02	-0,68	0,65**
Pleasant store atmosphere	0-3	1,00	1,17	0	0,55	-1,34	0,75**
Competent store staff	0-3	1,13	1,18	1	0,36	-1,47	0,79**
In-store informational materials (POS)	0-3	0,14	0,63	0	4,24	16,59	0,23**
Impulse purchases	0-3	0,33	0,88	0	2,54	4,94	0,41**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

The next part of the analysis focused on assessing which sensory experiences have the greatest impact on customers when making purchasing decisions. To this end, the Friedman test was applied, and its result proved to be statistically significant [$\chi^2(9) = 168,14$; $p < 0.001$], indicating a varying effectiveness of different sensory stimuli (Table 6).

Table 6.

Which Sensations Most Effectively Influence You When Making Purchasing Decisions?

	Group	Mdn	Mrang
I	store color scheme	0	5,79
II	shapes and sizes in the store (e.g., decorations)	0	4,68
III	color intensity	0	5,02
IV	type of scent	0	6,02
V	scent intensity	2	6,70
VI	taste experiences	0	4,52
VII	in-store textures	0	4,26
VIII	store temperature	1	6,92
IX	type of music (or its absence)	1	6,80
X	music tempo	0	4,30
$\chi^2(9)$	168,14**		
p	< 0,001		
Post- hoc	II < IX; II < V; II < VIII; III < IX; III < V; III < VIII; VI < IV; VI < IX; VI < V; VI < VIII; VII < I; VII < IV; VII < IX; VII < V; VII < VIII; X < I; X < IV; X < IX; X < V; X < VIII;		

Source: (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

A detailed post hoc analysis revealed that some sensory experiences have a significantly greater influence on purchasing decisions than others. Respondents also assessed the impact of store aesthetics and sensory experiences on their shopping decisions. They considered the

shapes and sizes of decorations, color intensity, and taste experiences to be less important than the type of music (or its absence), the intensity of scents, and the temperature inside the store. Taste experiences were also perceived as less influential than the type of scent. Additionally, store textures and music tempo were rated as less significant than store color schemes, the type and intensity of scent, music selection (or its absence), and the store's internal temperature (see Table 7).

Table 7.

Descriptive Statistics of the Sensations Most Effective in Influencing Purchase Decisions (n = 97)

	R	M	SD	Mdn	Sk	Kurt	W
store color scheme	0-3	0,77	1,20	0	1,11	-0,55	0,63**
shapes and sizes in the store (e.g., decorations)	0-3	0,25	0,71	0	3,03	8,41	0,40**
color intensity	0-3	0,40	0,87	0	1,98	2,52	0,51**
type of scent	0-3	0,81	1,17	0	1,05	-0,54	0,68**
scent intensity	0-3	1,12	1,14	2	0,18	-1,63	0,74**
taste experiences	0-3	0,22	0,74	0	3,42	10,33	0,31**
in-store textures	0-3	0,11	0,56	0	4,85	22,41	0,20**
store temperature	0-3	0,86	0,76	1	0,97	1,29	0,77**
type of music (or its absence)	0-3	1,23	1,29	1	0,28	-1,68	0,75**
music tempo	0-3	0,12	0,56	0	4,66	20,86	0,22**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

The analysis of responses to the question of whether the average customer of large-format FMCG stores is susceptible to merchandising activities, conducted using a one-factor chi-square test, showed a statistically significant deviation from a random distribution [$\chi^2 (2, N = 97) = 154,66$; $p < 0.001$]. The results of this analysis indicated that the vast majority of respondents (92.8%, $n = 90$) agreed with this statement.

5. Presentation of the Information Obtained from Interviews

5.1. Survey methodology

In order to compare the respondents' answers with the views of the leaders of an FMCG company, a qualitative study using interviews was conducted. Structured interviews were chosen, based on a set of 10 pre-prepared open-ended questions. The study, which took place in January 2022, involved employees of a company operating in the FMCG market. Employees in various positions within the company, such as Account Sales Advisor, Key Account Manager oraz H&S Field Manager, participated in the study. One person from each of these groups was selected using a non-random sampling method.

5.2. Characteristics of Respondents

Three people participated in the qualitative interviews. The studied group included one woman and two men with varying lengths of work experience (H&S Field Manager – 5 years, Key Account Manager – 4 months, Account Sales Advisor – 20 years).

5.3. Selected Results of the Qualitative Study

For the sake of clarity in the presentation of the research material, the leaders' responses are presented in Table 8.

Table 8.
Presentation of Information Obtained from Leaders

What factors most often influence a customer's choice of a grocery store?	Respondent 1: Assortment, promotions, and prices. An important variable is also the type of shopping: daily vs. weekly. Respondent 2: Location and a wide product assortment. Promotions (big discounts, freebies, etc.) also matter. Respondent 3: A wide product assortment and prices
Does the average FMCG customer know what merchandising is?	Respondent 1: The average FMCG customer has no idea what merchandising is. They are satisfied when they can easily find the product they are looking for in the store but frustrated when they cannot. Respondent 2: They have no idea and do not think about it at all. Respondent 3: Whether they know depends mainly on the customer and whether they are familiar with industry practices, but the vast majority of FMCG customers are unaware of merchandising.
Are customers aware that stores use merchandising strategies?	Respondent 1: Yes, customers are aware that stores use merchandising strategies, but they do not fully understand how they work and often perceive them as manipulation. Respondent 2: Yes, customers are aware that stores implement specific strategies to guide them through the store. However, they do not have detailed knowledge of how it works or what benefits it brings to retailers. Respondent 3: Whether customers are aware depends on their familiarity with the industry, but in most cases, they have no idea.
Which merchandising instruments are most important to customers?	Respondent 1: The key merchandising instruments from the customer's perspective are product placement on the shelf, promotions, and in-store informational materials (POS). Respondent 2: Depending on the category and point of sale, the most important factors for the average customer are product placement on the shelf, promotions, and in-store informational materials (POS). Respondent 3: The most important merchandising instruments for customers are product placement on the shelf, promotions, and in-store informational materials (POS).
Which merchandising strategy is best and why?	Respondent 1: The key strategy in the FMCG segment is the soft-selling strategy, where purchase repetition is very important. Respondent 2: The key strategies are the off-price strategy and the assortment strategy. Respondent 3: The best strategy currently is the off-price strategy, as evidenced by the popularity of discount stores among customers.
What sensory experiences have the greatest impact on customers?	Respondent 1: The average FMCG customer is influenced by the type and intensity of scent, temperature, and the presence or absence of music. Respondent 2: The most influential sensory factors affecting customers and their purchasing decisions include the type of scent, scent intensity, and store temperature. Respondent 3: The biggest influence on customers comes from the type of scent, scent intensity, and temperature.

Cont. table 8.

Do you agree with the statement that the average FMCG customer is susceptible to merchandising strategies?	<p>Respondent 1: Yes, the average FMCG customer is susceptible to merchandising strategies. The broad scope of these activities ensures that no customer remains indifferent to them.</p> <p>Respondent 2: Yes, I agree with this statement.</p> <p>Respondent 3: Yes, FMCG customers are susceptible to merchandising strategies. The impact of these strategies is significant, which is why stores focus heavily on such activities.</p>
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Interviewee 1: H&S Field Manager; Interviewee 2: Key Account Manager; Interviewee 3: Account Sales Advisor

Source: own graphic design based on (Pękała, Dudzik-Lewicka, 2022).

The analysis of responses provided by FMCG industry leaders in section 5.3 indicates that they emphasize the crucial role of a wide assortment and pricing in customers' choice of a store. At the same time, they note the limited awareness among customers regarding the essence of merchandising, despite their susceptibility to its influence. They identify product placement on shelves, promotions, and in-store informational materials (POS) as the most significant merchandising instruments from the customer's perspective. Regarding the best merchandising strategy, opinions among industry leaders vary, considering approaches such as soft-selling, off-price strategy, and assortment strategy. However, there is consensus on the significant impact of olfactory experiences (type and intensity of scent) and store temperature on customers' purchasing decisions, which ultimately confirms their overall susceptibility to merchandising activities.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations for Practice

Based on the conducted research proceedings, the following conclusions can be formulated:

- Conclusion 1 - The key factors determining the choice of a grocery store, according to both surveyed respondents and industry leaders, are a wide assortment and low prices.
- Conclusion 2 - Most respondents are aware of what merchandising is and the benefits it brings to manufacturers, stores, and buyers. They also recognize that stores implement merchandising strategies. Industry leaders confirmed this opinion but noted that the average consumer does not have full knowledge of how merchandising works and remains susceptible to its influence. Consequently, Hypothesis H1: Customers' susceptibility to merchandising techniques occurs at an unconscious level was not confirmed.
- Conclusion 3 - The opinions of industry leaders and survey respondents regarding key merchandising instruments differ. Industry leaders highlight product placement on shelves, promotions, and informational materials (POS), whereas respondents prefer promotions, competent store staff, and a pleasant in-store atmosphere. Hypothesis H2: The key merchandising instruments that effectively influence purchasing decisions are

proper product placement on shelves and store staff competencies was partially confirmed.

- Conclusion 4 - Both respondents and industry leaders agree that customers dislike store staff interfering with their purchasing decisions.
- Conclusion 5 - Industry leaders believe that olfactory experiences and store temperature are the most important factors for customers. Respondents, on the other hand, indicated that auditory experiences and scent intensity are significant, but temperature is the key factor. Hypothesis H3, which assumed that visual and auditory experiences have the strongest impact on customers in large-format stores, was partially confirmed.

Summary, the analysis of responses from both respondents and industry leaders shows that although the average customer is aware of the existence of merchandising, they remain susceptible to it. This is due to the wide range of merchandising activities, which even a well-informed person cannot fully resist. This confirms the main hypothesis of the study, which assumes that the average customer of large-format FMCG stores is susceptible to merchandising influence.

Consumers demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding merchandising, which enables them to clearly and precisely define their needs and expectations toward FMCG retail stores. Their insights have led to the formulation of the following recommendations for business practice:

- Recommendation 1 - To operate effectively, large-format stores should offer a wide assortment that meets customer needs and reduces shopping time. It is also crucial to set competitive prices to avoid being perceived as too expensive.
- Recommendation 2 - Promotional campaigns on products are highly important for customers shopping in large-format stores.
- Recommendation 3 - A smoother shopping process can be ensured through competent store staff and a pleasant in-store atmosphere.
- Recommendation 4 - Since customers prefer to make their own purchasing decisions and do not want to be pressured, stores are advised against using hard-selling strategies.
- Recommendation 5 - During shopping, store temperature and background music selection are key factors in enhancing the customer experience.

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