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**CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR
UNDER THE IMPACT OF NEW RETAIL
FORMATS IN ROMANIA**

Introduction

The Romanian distribution of consumer goods has experienced fundamental changes since 1990 and especially in the years 2000s. The “engine” of the ascending evolution of modern retailing were rather the large international chains that entered the market than the local entrepreneurs. The market drew the attention of key international players due to the potential demand of consumers and to the lower level of development of modern trade compared to the more advanced countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

From demographical perspective, Romania represents a sizable business opportunity. As regards the number of inhabitants, this country is second after Poland in Central and Eastern Europe. On 1 January 2011, the population of Romania reached a number of 21.4 million inhabitants while Poland registered 38.2 million inhabitants (Eurostat, 2011, p. 2). Even if population continuously decreased during the last two decades, the size of the market for consumer goods in Romania is very attractive for the global powers of retailing.

The positive perspective due to the market size is still challenged by the level of economic development. In 2008, compared to an average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of EUR 25,100 in the European Union (EU) with 27 Member States, Romania registered a level of EUR 6,500 (Eurostat, 2010). The value is higher than that of Bulgaria (EUR 4,500), but far behind those of countries ranked at the top such as Luxembourg (EUR 80,500), Denmark (EUR 42,400) or Ireland (EUR 40,900) and even far from the other Member States from Central and Eastern Europe, such as Czech Republic (EUR 14,200), Hungary (EUR 10,500) and Poland (EUR 9,500).

The propensity towards consumption is obvious in Romania. In 2006, the consumption expenditures represented 67.7% of the GDP (Eurostat, 2010). This proportion remains among the highest in the EU. The values of the indicator in other EU Member States were the following: 76.6% in Cyprus (in 2007), 74.15% in Greece (in 2007), 73.5% in Bulgaria (in 2006), 70.6% in Malta (in 2008), 65.9% in Portugal (in 2006), 64% in Lithuania (in 2007), 60.6% in Latvia (in 2007) and in the United Kingdom (in 2008) and 60.4% in Poland (in 2007).

The share of the household budget allocated for consumption expenses remains high. In the first quarter of the year 2011, the consumption expenses represented 71.6% of the total household expenditure (NIS, 2011). According to the standard

classification of the consumption expenses by use, 53.1% of household consumption was dedicated to three major categories of goods: agro-food products and non-alcoholic beverages (42%), alcoholic beverages and tobacco products (7.2%) and clothing and footwear (3.9%).

The lower purchasing power very likely hinders the total value of purchases on the Romanian market. However, this situation is compensated by the arduous interest of the Romanian consumers in the universe of modern retailing. They display a continuous “passion” for purchasing consumer goods, swinging between the need to wisely administer their household budgets and the glamorous experiences offered by every new retail format.

1. Outstanding retail growth potential

The shifts in the sales volume and structure of retailing by type of format were significant during the last two decades. Retailing evolved radically from a fragmental status in the 1990s to a sector driven by modern international chains in the years 2000s.

Bucharest, the capital of the country, and the largest urban centers were the points where changes began. These cities represented a significant potential demand untapped by relevant competitors (Balan, 2010, p. 232). The second “echelon” of urban centers – below 100,000 inhabitants – became a target in the next wave of expansion.

At present, in Romania, retailing is dominated by large retail chains. On 31 December 2010, there were several major chains representing various formats such as cash & carry, hypermarkets, supermarkets, discount stores and convenience stores (see Appendix 1).

The development of the retail network was substantial in 2010. More than 300 new stores were inaugurated. A distinct example is the retail chain Mic.Ro owned by the group Mercadia Holland BV. The entire network of 182 convenience stores was set-up in 2010, during a period of eight months, based on a deficit of proximity retail services for consumers in Bucharest and in other major cities of Romania. A relevant trend is the development of discount chains, favored by the economic downturn. The effervescence within the segment of discount stores continues in 2011. The experts foresee that Enterprise Investors (that controls the Profi chain) may become the leader of the discount scene in the case of a potential acquisition of the Penny Market chain.

The growth of the retail market in Romania was the highest within the region, during the period 2000-2010. According to the Oxford Economics Report, the increase in the retail sales value was 123% compared to 54% in Poland and Czech Republic and 26% in Hungary (Comaneci, Laes, Köchelhuber, 2011, p. 9). The Romanian FMCG retail market with a value of EUR 16 billion is expected to evolve annually by an average growth rate of 5% for the next ten years, thus leading to an overall growth of 62% in 2020, compared to 2011. In the same period, the forecasted growth for other markets from the region is 57% in Poland, 48% in Czech Republic and 46% in Hungary.

According to the real estate company DTZ Echinox, Romania has a potential for the development of a retail surface of sq.m. 784,000. The company Contrast Management-Consulting estimates a potential of sq.m. 830,000, out of which sq.m. 100,000 in Bucharest. Thus, the market may absorb an additional retail surface of at least sq.m. 37 by 1,000 inhabitants. The analysts of Planet Retail estimate there is a potential for the opening of new stores, respectively 70 hypermarkets and supermarkets, 1,100 discount stores, 1,300 convenience stores and 600 pharmacies.

The factors able to sustain the ascending trend are related to the macro and microenvironment, to both supply and demand on the retail market. A major influencing factor will be the development of the modern retailing in these countries. The emergence of new retail formats will neutralize the deficit of retail offerings at European standards in all the types of urban centers. Analysts expect a gradual improvement in the purchasing power of consumers that will have a positive impact upon the overall value of the Romanian retail market. At the same time, consumer behavior may change. Customers will become more demanding and will probably “divide” their loyalty among several retail chains.

2. Purchases by type of retail format

The attraction exerted by the retail offering at European standards generated a continuous shift from the traditional to the modern formats such as cash & carry, hypermarkets, supermarkets, discount stores and convenience stores etc. The share of modern trade in the sales value increased progressively on the expense of traditional retailing.

Modern formats held a share of 48% of the retail purchases in 2010 (see Figure 1). This level is close to that of Poland (52%). However, there is still a long path to reach levels such as the ones registered in Slovenia (67%) and Czech Republic (78%).

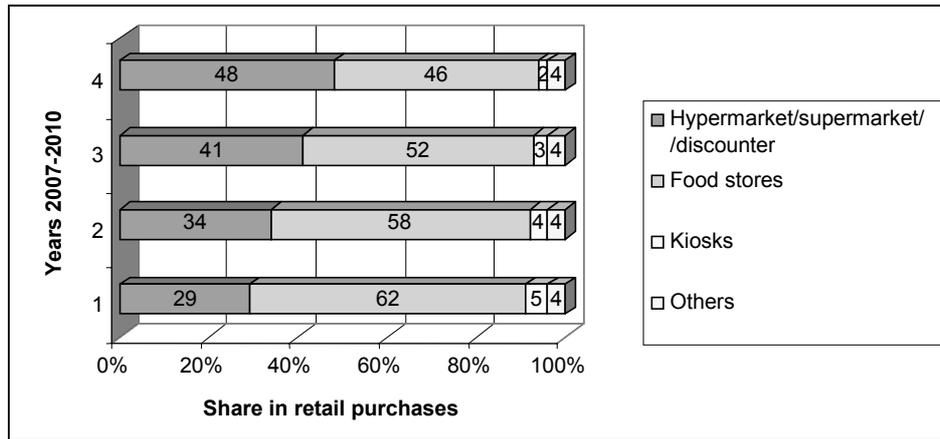


Figure 1. Share in the retail purchases by type of format

Source: Based on Shopper Trends 2011, presented in Vaschi (2011).

During a period of four years, from 2007 to 2010, the share of modern trade increased substantially, from 29% to 48%. One of the causes that led to this upsurge is the increase in the number of hypermarkets, supermarkets and discount stores from 653 in 2008 to 856 in 2010 (Vaschi, 2011). In 2009, discounters increased their presence in the market, while in 2010 supermarkets were leading the expansion of the modern retail network.

This trend is more impressive if analyzed in correlation with the economic turmoil at national and global scale. At first glance, this was a less friendly period for the development of international chains. Nevertheless, the economic and financial challenges favored the upswing of a specific retail format such as the discount store, due to the increased preoccupation of consumers to efficiently administer the budget of their households faced with numerous uncertainties.

3. Major features of and trends in consumer buying behavior

On the Romanian retail market, several features and trends are visible in the buying behavior of consumers related to the ascending evolution of modern trade. In essence, these trends refer to the following aspects: attitude towards shopping, planning of purchases, store selection and patronage, brand loyalty behavior and purchase of private brands.

3.1. Attitude towards shopping

Most Romanian buyers like to go for shopping. Three quarters of the buyers like or like very much this experience. However, a descending trend was registered during the period 2008-2010. This share was 79% in 2008, 77% in 2009 and 75% in 2010. Only 4-5% of the potential buyers do not like very much or at all to go for shopping. The attitude towards shopping is reflected by the Figure 2.

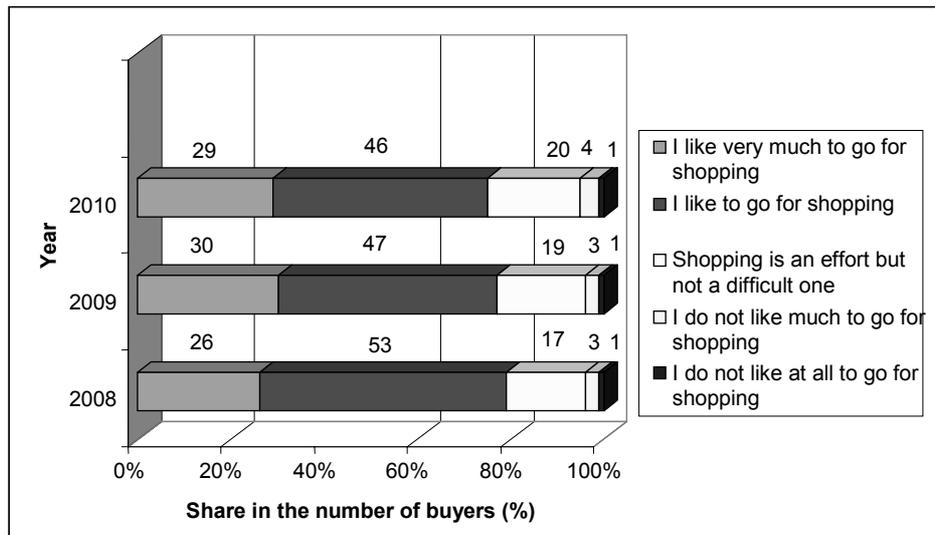


Figure 2. Attitude of consumers towards shopping

Source: The Nielsen Company (2011).

Based on the data from Figure 2, on a scale from 1 – “I do not like to go for shopping.” to 5 – “I like very much to go for shopping.”, the average score is 4. Thus, on the average, the Romanian buyers like to go for shopping.

For manufacturers and especially for retailers, the favorable attitude of potential buyers is the opportunity on which they may build and develop their businesses in Romania. In addition, consumers that enjoy shopping may be the first to adopt new store concepts that provide not only an array of products and services, but a complex experience in a special retail atmosphere.

3.2. Planning of purchases

Under the impact of the economic downturn, consumers paid more attention to consumption expenses. In search for thriftiness, an ever increasing number of consumers plan their purchases at home, before going to the store.

The Nielsen research Shopper Trends implemented in October-November 2010 – on a representative sample of 1,200 respondents from 12 large (more than 200,000 inhabitants) and average (between 50,000 and 200,000 inhabitants) urban centers of Romania – revealed that three quarters of the urban population plan the purchases in advance (Vaschi, 2011). Planning means for some of the consumers just thinking of the products/brands to be purchased, while for others means writing a purchasing list. In fact, 55% of the urban population uses a purchase list. Surprisingly, this share was slightly lower compared to the 59% registered in 2009.

Despite the programming behavior, the quasi-totality of consumers does not resist the temptation to purchase from impulse. This state of fact is stimulated by the increasingly sophisticated merchandising techniques applied by the international retail chains. Only 3% of buyers stick to their purchasing list and do not select any additional products/services.

The planning behavior of the Romanian consumers may be interpreted by producers and retailers as an opportunity to advertise products, brands and stores, in order to create familiarity and preference before the visit to the store. Even if the effect of advertising relies on a passive reception from the buyer's side, the messages may have a medium and long term impact that consists in building awareness, knowledge of product features and of brand personality, preference for product brand and store brand, as well as desire to experiment. At the same time, a TV or radio broadcasted advertising message of a store that aims to promote the purchases of a specific product/brand, at a discounted price within a weekend period may capitalize on the planning behavior of consumers.

Nevertheless, the behavior of the Romanian consumer is marked by both decision purchase programming and impulse buying. Consequently, top manufacturers that control the display of their brands on the store shelves and retailers themselves should apply appropriate techniques of merchandising, shopper marketing and sales promotion, in order to increase the value of purchases on the occasion of each store visit.

3.3. Store selection and patronage

Distinct features and trends relative to the buying behavior of the Romanian consumers refer to the criteria of store selection and to the frequency of store visits. The range of criteria of store selection includes: the store proximity to the house or to the job, respectively the time to get to the store; the price levels; the diversity of food and non-food products within the store assortment; the product freshness and quality. The importance attached to each of these criteria is presented in the Table 1.

Table 1

Importance of the criteria of store selection by retail format in 2010 (percentages)

Selection criterion	Retail format				
	super-market	hyper-market	discount store	traditional store	total retail
Proximity to the house or job/ /time to get to the store	59	49	51	51	51
Price levels	42	43	58	43	46
Assortment diversity	22	43	37	21	36
Product freshness and quality	21	10	12	37	16

Source: Based on: Shopping Monitor (2010), presented in GfK Romania (2011).

For most types of retail formats, consumers prefer the stores that are closer to their house or job. One exception must be noticed – the case of discount stores. Consumers that buy from discounters are so focused on prices that they will very likely select the discount store with the most affordable prices against one in proximity.

The consumers that like to shop in hypermarkets, the price level and the assortment diversity have a similar importance in the process of specific hypermarket selection. Assortment diversity and product freshness are less important criteria for store selection for those who purchase from hypermarkets and discount stores.

In essence, manufacturers and retailers face a customer that is preoccupied rather of making economies of resources than of enjoying firstly product freshness and quality or a wide array of choices. Overall, on the average, the Romanian consumer selects the stores based on time and budget criteria.

Consequently, three business options should be considered by the investors in retailing. Firstly, the territorial expansion of the store networks will meet the proximity expectation of buyers. Secondly, the marketing mix of all the retail formats should be adjusted so that value for buyers is augmented in terms of the quality/price ratio. Examples of marketing strategies that may lead to higher profits for retailers are the following:

- (i) communication of the store chain focus on low prices or on everyday low prices,
- (ii) setting low prices for a defined set of products of current/frequent consumption (not for all the products from the store assortment), in order to attract buyers, to create store traffic and to generate an image of low-price store or good quality/price offering,
- (iii) design and implementation of sales promotion programs (under the form of discounts, value packs etc.) in association with manufacturers.

Thirdly, a profitable business option may be the development of hard-discount stores, based on the favorable attitude of the Romanian consumers towards low prices in times of economic uncertainties and towards the discount concept.

There are significant differences among buyers in terms of the frequency of store visits. A research study designed by ISRA Center and implemented in November 2010 on a sample of 11,113 respondents that is representative at national scale led to the results presented in the Figure 3.

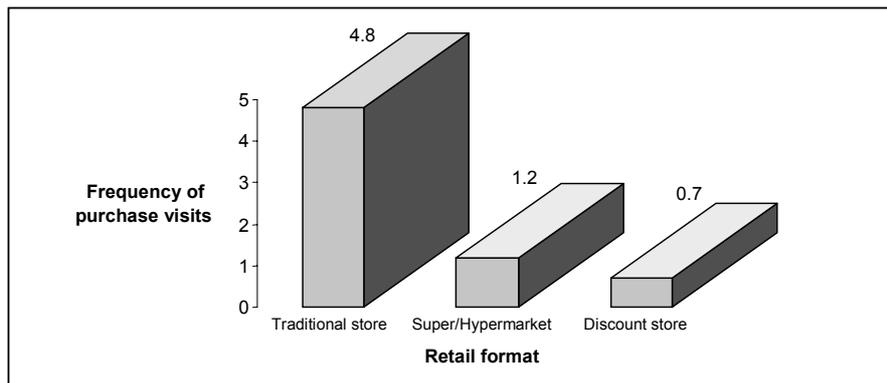


Figure 3. The frequency of visits by type of retail format

Source: ISRA Center survey presented in Vaschi (2010).

At national scale, the traditional formats still dominate the retailing landscape in terms of number of stores, sales value and number of visits per week. In 2010, the declared frequency of visits was four times higher than in the case of supermarkets and hypermarkets, almost seven times higher than for the discount stores. The traditional stores are more frequently visited by consumers from the Oltenia region, the consumers from small towns (below 100,000 inhabitants) and the consumers within the 20-29 year bracket.

The frequency of visits in supermarkets and hypermarkets is 1.2 times per week at national level. In the Crisana-Maramures region, the frequency is on average 2.2 times per week, while in Bucharest is 1.1, close to the national average. Young people use to visit supermarkets and hypermarkets more frequently than consumers within the 50-69 year bracket. A frequency of one visit per month is made by 23% of the consumers of 50-69 years old compared to 15% of the consumers at national scale.

The discount stores reach an average visit frequency of less than once per week. However, the consumers from Transylvania and Muntenia declare a frequency of 1.0 and 1.1 per week. One quarter of the urban inhabitants did not shop at least once from a discount store.

The frequency of the purchase visits should be carefully analyzed. The frequency gaps are not necessarily the result of the consumer preferences directed towards a specific type of retail format. In fact, the major cause of the differences is the imbalanced coverage of the market territory by the various retail formats. The promoters of modern retailing targeted firstly the large urban centers and several groups gradually expanded later in the smaller-size centers. The density of modern retail space provides a development potential that cannot be neglected. In addition, the expansion of the discount stores has started in 2009-2010 and new developments are expected in the near future.

3.4. Brand loyalty behavior

The loyalty bonds between consumers and a specific brand are not always so strong to stop the migration to other brands in the same product category. One of the situations in which loyalty bonds are questioned is the out-of-stock, when the brand is missing from the store shelf and inventory.

From the loyalty perspective, there are two major categories of buyers: loyal customers and “experimenters” that migrate to other brands. The loyal customers are those who display one of the following types of behavior:

- (i) purchase the same brand but a different product in terms of weight or flavor,
- (ii) buy the same product from another store,
- (ii) postpone purchase until the brand is available on store shelves.

Data about these types of behavior in the case of several product categories are presented in Table 2.

On the Romanian retail market, in the case of the above mentioned product categories, customer loyalty in out-of-stock situations is rather the exception than the rule. Sweets, beer, carbonated soft drinks, dairy products and basic food products are marked by the migration phenomenon. The buyers confronted with the absence of the sought brand select another brand in the same category. Packed coffee, personal care products and even household cleaning products benefit from more loyal customers.

Most loyal customers search the same brand in another store. The share held by these customers in the overall number of buyers varies between 24% and 46% by product category.

Table 2

Brand loyalty in out-of-stock situation* (percentages)

Product categories	Behavior of loyal customers				Behavior of experimenters
	purchase different SKU of the same brand	buy same brand from another store	postpone purchase	total	migration to other brands
Carbonated soft drinks	8	27	9	44	56
Packed coffee	8	46	8	62	38
Sweets	10	24	4	38	62
Dairy products	8	35	4	47	53
Basic food products	9	32	6	47	53
Personal care products	8	43	14	65	35
Beer	7	28	7	42	58
Household cleaning products	14	32	8	54	46

* Data for November 2010.

Source: Based on Shopper Trends (The Nielsen Company, 2011).

The behavior of some loyal customers that consists in purchasing the same brand from another store should be appreciated by manufacturers as a special proof of loyalty. The buyers accept an additional time investment in order to procure their most preferred brand. This is the very likely the dream of every manufacturer – the creation of strong bonds between brand and customer.

The Nielsen research Shopper Trends revealed that loyalty towards brands in out-of-stock situations slightly decreases for several product categories. The intensity of the loyalty bonds varies by product category as shown in Figure 4.

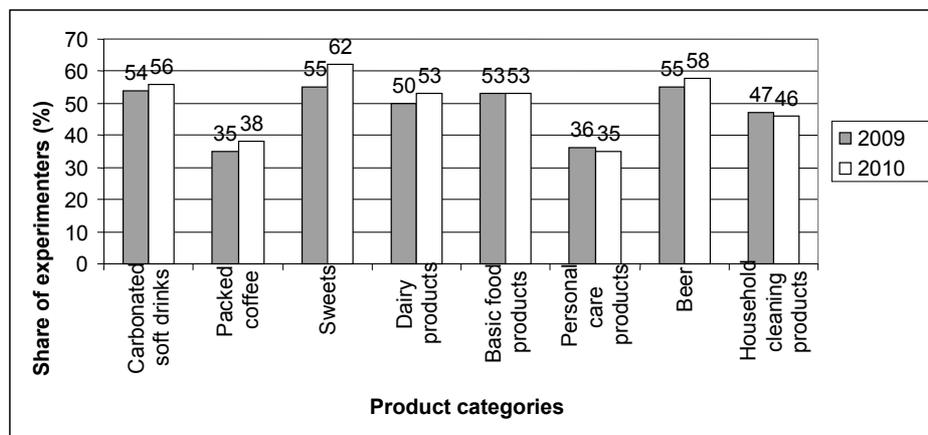


Figure 4. Share of experimenters in 2009 and 2010

Source: Based on Shopper Trends (The Nielsen Company, 2011).

Some product categories are affected to a larger extent by the migration behavior in out-of-stock situations. An illustrative example is represented by the sweets category for which the share of the experimenters augmented from 55% in 2009 to 62% in 2010. Other product categories in which the migration phenomenon slightly increased are beer (from 55% to 58%), packed coffee (from 25% to 38%), dairy products (from 50% to 53%) and carbonated soft drinks (from 54% to 56%).

Is the migration behavior in out-of-stock situations a challenge or an opportunity? The answer depends on the market player. For the individual buyer, it may be an occasion to either enjoy delightful experiences with other brands within the category or consolidate the trust in the most preferred brand. For the competing manufacturers and retailers, the propensity of customers to experiment in

out-of-stock situations is a “blessing” because it is a possible way to acquire new customers that may be further retained. For the actual providers of the out-of-stock brand, the migration behavior is on one side an indicator of lost sales as well as of potentially “lost-for-good” customer and on the other side a sign of dysfunctional logistics, merchandising and sales force management. Frequent situations of depleted inventory are real chances for competitors to progressively erode the customer portfolio of a brand.

3.5. Purchase of private brands

Private brands have a strong hold on the retail shelves in the Europe. The large retail chains have generally developed a portfolio of brands dedicated to the different consumer segments. The main reasons for the existence of such brands in the modern retail stores are the following: to differentiate from the offering of the competitive chains and increase the attraction exerted among customers; to develop customer loyalty due to trusted private brands with a good quality/price ratio; to augment the negotiation power in front of manufacturers and distributors due to a similar offering at lower prices; to ensure a continuous revenue stream from the purchases made by loyal customers and to obtain a higher margin.

The share of private brands in the retail assortments varies by country (Ardelean, 2011). The highest share in Europe is registered in Switzerland (46% in 2010), followed by the United Kingdom (42%), Spain (38%), Portugal (30%), Germany, Austria and France (28% each). The Eastern-European countries witnessed an ascending trend in the market share of private brands, such as Slovakia and Hungary with a market share of 20% each and Czech Republic with 17%. At present, the estimated market share in Romania is 15%.

The Private Label Manufacturers Association has underlined that private brands are not an output of the recession. Nevertheless, the economic and financial difficulties experienced lately by most countries have increase the sensitiveness of buyers towards brands with a valuable quality/price ratio.

In Romania, the research Shopper Trends implemented by the Nielsen Company in 2010 shown that most buyers are familiar with private brands. They are not only aware of their existence, but they also purchase private brands (see Figure 5).

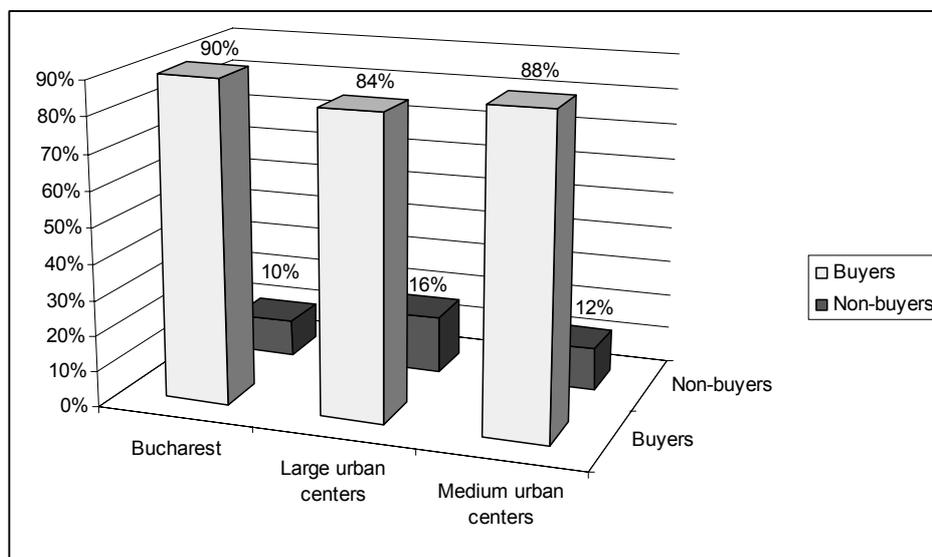


Figure 5. Percentage of buyers and non-buyers of private brands by size of urban center

Source: The Nielsen Company (2011).

According to the “common wisdom”, private brands are bought by customers with low income. In accordance with the statements of experts in private branding, in the developed European countries, the target market includes not only the budget-constrained segment, but also buyers with high income and background levels.

In Romania, the diverse typology of buyers of private brands is a reality. The proof is the high share of buyers in the overall number of inhabitants from Bucharest as well as from large and medium urban centers. However, an additional aspect should be considered. The data presented in the Figure 5 do not reflect the actual situation at national scale. They do not include the small urban centers and the rural areas where modern retail chains have not expanded yet and private brand are not present.

Conclusions

Challenge and opportunity are the emblem of the Romanian retailing due to the specific features of the consumer buying behavior and major shifts in the field. Compared to other countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Romania pro-

vides a significant growth potential to modern retailing from the perspective of trade infrastructure and market demand. The purchasing power and the economic crisis did not limit the positive evolution of modern retailing.

Several major trends in consumer behavior may be underlined. Firstly, consumers embraced the modern retail formats mainly in a quest for new shopping experiences and a wider array of choices in terms of goods, brands and quality. Secondly, Romanian consumers became gradually less loyal to brands and stores, displaying more knowledge about retailing, more requirements and selectivity in their choices. Thirdly, consumers from large and medium urban centers embraced private brands searching a relevant quality/price ratio. Fourthly, every new retail format became an attraction for the Romanian consumers in their search for both the best deal and a hedonist experience. Hypermarkets, supermarkets and discount stores capture the attention of an ever increasing number of Romanian consumers.

The modern retail formats have left their mark on the buying behavior of the Romanian consumers. In the mean time, the new features of and trends in the buying behavior are able to stimulate the further development of the international retail chains. The Romanian market will represent an arena of intense competition among the traditional and modern formats on one side and among the international powers of retailing on the other side. The prospects of modern retailing are outstanding on this market. Nevertheless, the most important expected outcome is that consumers are net beneficiaries of these trends.

Appendix 1

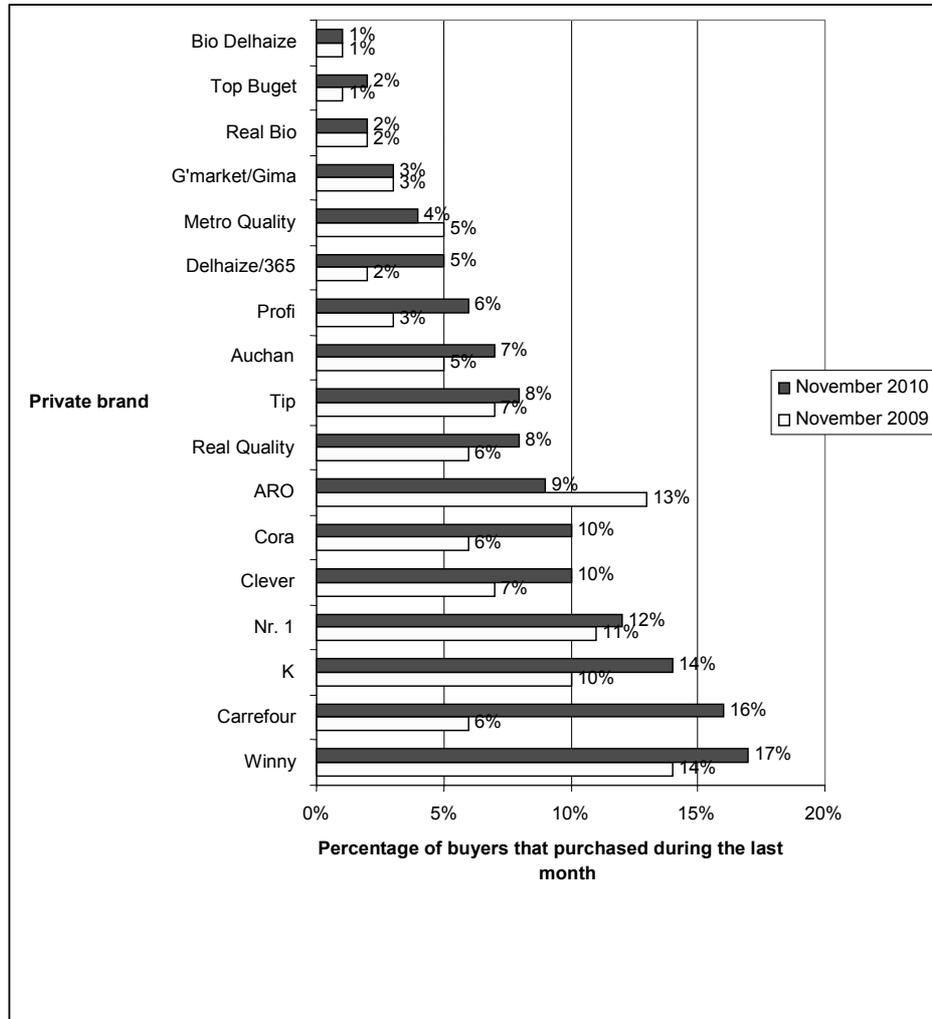
Major retail chains in Romania on 31 December 2010

Group/Company	Retail chain	Type of retail format	Number of stores	
			on 31 December 2010	inaugurated in 2010
Metro Group/Metro cash & carry	Metro	cash & carry	26	2
Metro Group/Metro cash & carry	Metro Punct	cash & carry	4	4
TransGourmet Holding SE	Selgros	cash & carry	18	-
Carrefour Group/ Carrefour Romania	Carrefour	hypermarket	23	1
Carrefour Group/ Carrefour Romania	Carrefour market	supermarket	32	10
Schwarz Group	Kaufland	hypermarket	58	13
Metro Group/ Real Hypermarket	Real	hypermarket	25	1
Louis Delhaize Group	Cora	hypermarket	5	2
Auchan Group/MGV Distri-Hiper	Auchan	hypermarket	7	-
Rewe Group	Billa	supermarket	55	13
Delhaize Group	Mega Image	supermarket	59	10
Delhaize Group	Red Market	low-cost supermarket	12	9
Groupement des Mousquetaires – ITM Entreprises	Interex	supermarket	12	1
Fiba Group	G'Market	supermarket	4	-
Rewe Group	Penny Market/ /XXL	discount supermarket	117	18
Tengelmann Group	Plus Discount*	discount supermarket	108	12
Enterprise Investors	Profi	discount supermarket	80	14
Mercadia Holland BV	miniMax	discount store	44	14
Mercadia Holland BV	Mic.Ro	convenience store	182	182
Delhaize Group	Shop & Go	convenience store	2	2

* Since March 2011, Plus discount stores are Lidl outlets, being acquired by Lidl & Schwarz.Co & KG from the Tengelman Group.

Appendix 2

Private brands bought during the last month*



* November 2010 compared to November 2009.

Source: The Nielsen Company (2011).

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