

11.18: Supply Chains and Distribution Channels

Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between supply chains and distribution channels

What Is a Supply Chain?



Figure 11.18.1: Supply Chain of Peanut Butter.

We have discussed the channel partners, the roles they fill, and the structures they create. Marketers have long recognized the importance of managing distribution channel partners. As channels have become more complex and the flow of business has become more global, organizations have recognized that they need to manage more than just the channel partners. They need to manage the full chain of organizations and transactions from raw materials through final delivery to the customer—in other words, *the supply chain*.

A supply chain is the system through which an organization acquires raw material, produces products, and delivers the products and services to its customers. Figure 1 illustrates a typical supply chain. Supply chain management helps increase the efficiency of logistics service by minimizing inventory and moving goods efficiently from producers to the ultimate users.

On their way from producers to end users and consumers, products pass through a series of marketing entities known as a **distribution channel**.

The Functions of Distribution Channels

Why do distribution channels exist? Why can't every firm sell its products directly to the end user or consumer? Why are go-betweens needed? Channels serve a number of functions.

Channels Reduce the Number of Transactions

Channels make distribution simpler by reducing the number of transactions required to get a product from the manufacturer to the consumer. For example, if there are four students in a course and a professor requires five textbooks (each from a different publisher), a total of 20 transactions would be necessary to accomplish the sale of the books. If the bookstore serves as a go-between, the number of transactions is reduced to nine. Each publisher sells to one bookstore rather than to four students. Each student buys from one bookstore instead of from five publishers (see Figure 2).

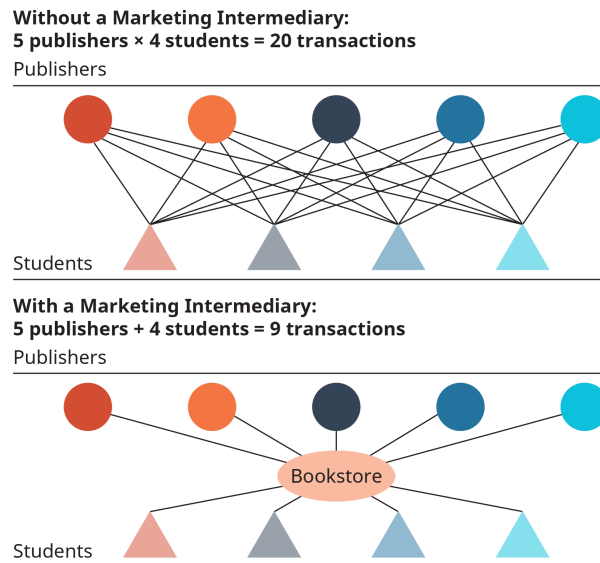


Figure 11.18.2: How Distribution Channels Reduce the Number of Transactions (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY 4.0 license.)

Dealing with channel intermediaries frees producers from many of the details of distribution activity. Producers are traditionally not as efficient or as enthusiastic about selling products directly to end users as are channel members. First, producers may wish to focus on production. They may feel that they cannot both produce and distribute in a competitive way. On the other hand, manufacturers are eager to deal directly with giant retailers, such as Walmart, which offer huge sales opportunities to producers.

Channels Ease the Flow of Goods

Channels make distribution easier in several ways. The first is by *sorting*, which consists of the following:

- *Sorting out:* Breaking many different items into separate stocks that are similar. Eggs, for instance, are sorted by grade and size. Another example would be different lines of women's dresses—designer, moderate, and economy lines.
- *Accumulating:* Bringing similar stocks together into a larger quantity. Twelve large Grade A eggs could be placed in some cartons and 12 medium Grade B eggs in other cartons. Another example would be to merge several lines of women's dresses from different designers together.
- *Allocating:* Breaking similar products into smaller and smaller lots (allocating at the wholesale level is called **breaking bulk**.) For instance, a tank-car load of milk could be broken down into gallon jugs. The process of allocating generally is done when the goods are dispersed by region and as ownership of the goods changes.

Without the sorting, accumulating, and allocating processes, our modern consumer society would not exist. Instead, there would be home-based industries providing custom or semicustom products to local markets. In short, society would return to a much lower level of consumption.

A second way channels ease the flow of goods is by locating buyers for merchandise. A wholesaler must find the right retailers to sell a profitable volume of merchandise. A sporting-goods wholesaler, for instance, must find the retailers who are most likely to reach sporting-goods consumers. Retailers have to understand the buying habits of consumers and put stores where consumers want and expect to find the merchandise. Every member of a distribution channel must locate buyers for the products it is trying to sell.

Channel members also store merchandise so that goods are available when consumers want to buy them. The high cost of retail space often means many goods are stored by the wholesaler or manufacturer.

? Practice Question

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Supply Chain vs. Marketing Channels

The supply chain and marketing channels can be differentiated in the following ways:

1. **The supply chain is broader than marketing channels.** It begins with raw materials and delves deeply into production processes and inventory management. Marketing channels are focused on bringing together the partners who can most efficiently deliver the right marketing mix to the customer in order to maximize value. Marketing channels provide a more narrow focus within the supply chain.
2. **Marketing channels are purely customer facing.** Supply chain management seeks to optimize how products are supplied, which adds a number of financial and efficiency objectives that are more internally focused. Marketing channels emphasize a stronger market view of the customer expectations and competitive dynamics in the marketplace.
3. **Marketing channels are part of the marketing mix.** Supply chain professionals are specialists in the delivery of goods. Marketers view distribution as one element of the marketing mix, in conjunction with product, price, and promotion. Supply chain management is more likely to identify the most efficient delivery partner. A marketer is more likely to balance the merits of a channel partner against the value offered to the customer. For instance, it might make sense to keep a channel partner who is less efficient but provides important benefit in promotional strategy.

Successful organizations develop effective, respectful partnerships between the marketing and supply chain teams. When the supply chain team understands market dynamics and the points of flexibility in product and pricing, they are better able to optimize the distribution process. When marketing has the benefit of effective supply chain management—which is analyzing and optimizing distribution within and beyond the marketing channels—greater value is delivered to customers.

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