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Product deletion: a critical overview and empirical insight into this process

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Product deletion: a critical overview and empirical insight into this process

Abstract

With organisations as diverse as Heinz, Kraft, Polygram and Sony reducing the scope of their product portfolios, it appears that the issue of product deletion is currently exercising managerial minds. Those keen to pursue their interest in this area will find a concise body of work spanning nearly six decades. However, missing from this work is an understanding of the recurring tactical, strategic and cultural variables involved in deletion decision-making. This research sought to alleviate this shortcoming through conducting an in-depth literature review and considering the deletion experiences of three world-renowned organisations. The results of this exploratory study provide an initial insight into the core product deletion variables, providing managers and academics with valuable up-to-date information on this contemporary subject matter.

Keywords

deletion, into, process, overview, this, empirical, critical, insight, product

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Product deletion: a critical overview and empirical insight into this process

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With organisations as diverse as Heinz, Kraft, Polygram and Sony reducing the scope of their product portfolios, it appears that the issue of product deletion is currently exercising managerial minds. Those keen to pursue their interest in this area will find a concise body of work spanning nearly six decades. However, missing from this work is an understanding of the recurring tactical, strategic and cultural variables involved in deletion decision-making. This research sought to alleviate this shortcoming through conducting an in-depth literature review and considering the deletion experiences of three world-renowned organisations. The results of this exploratory study provide an initial insight into the core product deletion variables, providing managers and academics with valuable up-to-date information on this contemporary subject matter.

Introduction

Over five decades ago Marvin (1959, p. 107) indicated that for organisations ‘prosperity and growth are results of soundly planning product “portfolios”’. Day (1977), Goldgehn and Lagrace (1983) and Procter and Hassard (1990) called for senior managers to become more actively involved in product portfolio management. Similarly, Wind and Mahajan (1981), Snelson and Hart (1991) and Cooper, Edgett and Kleinschmidt (1999) outlined the need for managers to monitor and where need be, adapt their product portfolio(s) either through the introduction of new products and/or the deletion of existing products. New product development has received considerable academic and managerial attention, aided no doubt, by the potential rewards, risks and the glamour associated with the area (Alexander, 1964). Interest in product deletion, an activity involving the decision to ‘discontinue the production and marketing of a product’ (Avlonitis, 1986a; p. 1) either through replacing a product with an alternative offering or eradicating a product altogether, has been more sporadic. However, after two decades characterised by product proliferation (Petrocelli, Morrison and Million, 2002; Frost, 2004) it appears that the situation is changing. For example, Unilever introduced the ‘Path to

Growth' strategy aiming to reduce the organisation's brand portfolio by 75% (Marsh, 2001). Procter and Gamble embarked on a similar 'Organisation 2005' initiative (Michaels, 2000). Sony, Heinz and Japanese cosmetics giant, Shiseido have sought to rationalise their product portfolios (Sanchanta, 2007; Frost, 2004; Grant, 2005). Even products with the royal seal of approval are not immune from such activities. Duchy Originals, the company established by Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, recently halved its product range (Wood, 2009). With rapid technological change, competitive pressure and poor economic conditions increasing the importance attributed to product deletion (Worthing, 1975; Avlonitis, 1986a) the current economic malaise is likely to increase the pressure on organisations to delete peripheral products which inhibit an organisation's profitability.¹ In this situation, managers and academics may look to the existing product deletion literature for guidance: in doing so they will find a concise, apposite body of literature. However, missing from this literature is a contemporary overview adopting Webster's (1992, 2005) 'expanded view' of marketing outlining the fundamental tactical (e.g. the four Ps), strategic (e.g. the markets served, targeting, positioning, in essence how the organisation competes in its designated sector) and cultural (e.g. organisational cognition, norms of behaviour) variables associated with product deletion decision-making. The following paper seeks to address this shortcoming, by drawing on the literature to identify:

- Key tactical and strategic variables associated with each stage of the conventional product deletion process.
- The recurring cultural issues influencing product deletion decision-making and their saliency in a modern day context as well as using primary and secondary data analysis to provide a practical guide to deletion decision-making.

The research is exploratory in nature, case study driven (Yin, 2008) and aimed at illustrating topical issues and the state of current knowledge on product deletion. The intention is to highlight themes and issues to frame and shape further theory development and empirical testing.

Product deletion: literature overview

A significant proportion of the conceptual writings penned during what Argouslidis and McLean (2003) termed the 'non-empirical phase' (1952 to 1978) suggest product deletion decision-making is a sequential process with deletion candidates tending to be weak products that have fallen short of their sales, profits and/or market share expectations (Vyas, 1993). While a series of conceptual frameworks were introduced during this period their applicability has since been queried. Avlonitis (1986a, p. 62) believed these frameworks to be 'distilled from somewhat limited experience, common sense, and logic' with 'distinct overtones of evangelical fervour'. Kotler (1965) and Alexander (1964, p. 62), two of the original protagonists, cast further doubts on these frameworks the latter stating: 'Exactly what these [elimination] policies

¹ See Bereson (1963), Kotler (1965) and Evans (1977) for further details.

should be, what form these procedures should take and to whom the job should be assigned, are matters that must vary with the structure and operating methods of the firm'. Alongside the tactical and strategic variables, a number of cultural issues were also addressed during the non-empirical phase. For example, Kotler (1965) discussed employees' aversion to product deletion and the subsequent use of organisational politics.

The initial conceptualisations of the product deletion process were quickly superseded during the early empirical phase (1970–1979) (Argouslidis and McLean, 2003). Researchers examined the deletion practices of a variety of organisations operating in the industrial and consumer goods sectors (Rothe, 1970; Eckles, 1971; Pletcher, 1973; Banville and Pletcher, 1974; Hise and McGinnis, 1975). This work, while useful, suffered from a lack of cohesion and the use, at times, of small, non-representative samples, as well as the dominance of US-based organisations (Avlonitis, 1986a). Limited regard was also given to additional situational, organisational or environmental factors which could influence organisations' deletion decision-making.

More recently, understanding of the product deletion process has progressed with a number of authors making extensive contributions to the area (e.g. Avlonitis and James, 1982; Avlonitis, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1993; Hart, 1988, 1989, 1990; Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas, 2000). These authors considered the product deletion process used by UK industrial and consumer goods organisations and how these processes can be affected by various contextual elements. Hart (1990) and Avlonitis (1983, 1985, 1986a) also commented on a number of cultural issues including employee involvement in deletion decision-making, the frequency with which organisations address deletion issues, and the level of formality to adopt. This work culminated in the production of a product deletion typology, something that could 'contribute to a more effective and streamlined approach to decision making in this area' (Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas, 2000, p. 42). The typology provides a useful 'short hand device' facilitating comparisons (Hambrick, 1983). However, it uses data collected nearly three decades ago. As such, the age of the information used to construct the typology is of concern as the intervening period has been characterised by considerable change with increased merger and acquisition activities, heightened competition and more generic product offerings (Dimitratos, McDonald and Tüselmann, 2003; Betts, 2006). The retail climate has also changed with the emergence of an oligopolistic market (Bell, Davies and Howard, 1997). Given the dramatically different contemporary environment there is a need to question whether Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas's (2000) deletion typology is still applicable. While the deletion frameworks introduced over the last fifty years may aid product deletion decision-making, they tend to be conceptual in nature and reliant on old and/or sector specific data. A number of cultural issues are discussed. However, no attempt has been made to ascertain the central, recurring cultural issues associated with product deletion nor how organisations today actually deal with these issues. Thus, while the previous writings are informative, they fail to provide an overview of the central tactical, strategic and cultural variables involved in the deletion decision-making process. As such, the aims of the paper are valuable and timely.

Method

An exhaustive electronic (and where needed, manual) search for relevant journal articles using a variety of academic and practitioner databases and information sources (e.g. Emerald, JSTOR, EBSCO, Caravan) was conducted to locate the available product deletion literature. Keywords such as – ‘product’ ‘deletion’ ‘elimination’ ‘abandonment’ ‘exit’ ‘phase out’ ‘elimination’ ‘portfolio management’, ‘mix management’ were used. The resulting information was systematically analysed to identify the recurring tactical, strategic and cultural elements associated with product deletion. In order to gain a contemporary insight into the cultural elements the findings from the literature were considered alongside the experiences of three large fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) organisations: a world renowned household care and healthcare organisation based in the USA (Mop), a UK-based hot drinks/foodstuffs provider (Cake) and a personal healthcare organisation (Tablet) with its headquarters in the UK. The names have been disguised at the request of the companies concerned. A case study approach was adopted as it was deemed appropriate for investigating how decisions are made in practice and the implicit/underlying reasons and opinions associated with the decision-making process (Schramm, 1971; Carroll and Johnson, 1990). Yin (2008) clarifies the roles of even a limited number of case studies in identifying and illustrating interesting situations and helping build theoretical knowledge. A convenience sample of three large FMCG organisations was chosen here for a number of reasons. Firstly, such organisations face intense competition, a situation that is likely to prompt the consideration of cost saving measures such as product deletion (Avlonitis, 1986a). Secondly, with a shift in power from manufacturing to retail organisations (Kotzab and Teller, 2003; Dawson and Shaw, 1990; Olver and Farris, 1989) the emergence of an oligopolistic European grocery retail sector (Quelch and Harding, 1996; Bell, Davies and Howard, 1997; Tomkins, 2000) and increasing consumer confusion caused by burgeoning product lines (Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas, 2000; Buckley, 2002 and Seth, 2004) product deletion activities are a key concern for organisations heavily reliant on the retail sector (e.g. organisations providing consumer goods/FMCG products). Finally, the deletion experiences of large organisations vary more from one organisation to the next when compared to smaller organisations (Avlonitis 1987, 1993). So through focusing on large organisations a broad range of information/insights can be obtained. Mop, Tablet and Cake were singled out as they each met the required criteria and further to this the three organisations represented a range of large FMCG organisations. Mop is a truly omnipresent organisation operating in numerous sectors and with its brands available in over 180 countries. Tablet operates in numerous countries but focuses on a select number of product categories. Cake is an international company yet it focuses predominantly on the UK market. The data was collected over a three-year period from 2003 to 2006.

Data was collected from all three organisations via: (a) a total of 25 in-depth interviews/informal discussions, each lasting between 45 minutes and 3.5 hours (b) seven brief follow up questionnaires clarifying points raised in the discussions and (c) direct involvement with a four month, in-house, project

investigating the relevance of the personal healthcare organisation's product portfolio within selected markets. In order to investigate the complex and interrelated nature of deletion decision-making, the emphasis was placed on the organisation's general approach to the issue rather than any individual deletion decisions encountered. With Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas (2000, p. 44) indicating that personnel from the sales and marketing departments tend to have 'the most complete knowledge of the product deletion decisions in their firms' and Vyas (1993) championing the marketers 'watchdog' position on product deletion, the research sought out the opinions of such informants. However, to gain a comprehensive view, managers working in a variety of departments (e.g. manufacturing, logistics, finance, account management) were also interviewed. The number of interviews conducted varied from one organisation to the next. This is attributed to the varying degrees of access and the number of suitable interviewees available. The number of interviews does not detract from the quality of the information collected and the insights provided. For example, in the case of Cake, while only three interviews were conducted two of the interviews lasted over three hours and involved two of the organisation's six board members. The positions of the informants within each organisation are detailed in Table 1.

The data analysis used Miles and Huberman's 'rigorous' six stage approach (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1997). A colour-coding scheme was adopted with various colours allotted to the different stages of the product deletion process and the differing product deletion issues addressed. With the literature review and primary data analysis complete the colour-coded data was brought together. This process enabled the systematic dissection of the literature and empirical data helping to reveal the relevant themes.

Results

The results have been broken down into two sections. The first section summarises the literature highlighting the tactical and strategic variables associated with each stage of the product deletion process. The second section offers a discussion on the recurring cultural factors that impact on product deletion decision-making and considers the applicability of these cultural factors within the three case study organisations.

Strategic and tactical considerations

The literature reveals that the strategic and tactical factors associated with deletion decision-making vary in accordance with organisational idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, there are a number of recurring variables corresponding to each stage of the product deletion process. Figure 1 presents these variables indicating whether they are discussed as strategic (S) and/or tactical (T) factors. Some variables are clearly one or the other. However, a few can be strategic to the organisation as a whole, but in terms of product deletion decision-making they are more tactical in nature. Financial recognition and evaluation variables, for instance, are clearly of strategic concern at an organisational level (e.g. the attainment of certain profit levels). Yet within the deletion context they act as triggers to, or measures of, the viability of

Table 1: Primary research information sources

Organisation	Information source	Occupation
TABLET Personal healthcare organisation	Informant 1	Sales Representative
	Informant 2	Marketing Consultant
	Informant 3	Senior Account Manager
	Informant 4	Marketing Director
	Informant 5	Demand Planning Director
	Informant 6	Product Supply Director
	Informant 7	Marketing Manager
	Informant 8	Senior Demand Planner
	Informant 9	LIP/RIP Manager
	Informant 10	Audit Manager
	Informant 11	Trade Marketing Coordinator
	Project Note Book (data gathered through participant observation and numerous informal discussions)	NPD Manager
		Marketing Manager
		Marketing Controller
		Demand Planning Director
MOP Household care and healthcare organisation	Informant 12	Marketing Strategy and Planning Manager
	Informant 13	Customer Services and Logistics Manager
	Informant 14	Marketing Strategy and Planning Manager
	Informant 15	Finance Manager
	Informant 16	Customer Business Development Manager
CAKE Hot drinks/foodstuffs provider	Informant 17	Creative Director and Board Member
	Informant 18	Commodities Director and Board Member
	Informant 19	Operations Manager

potential deletion candidates. A similar situation exists in relation to the managerial evaluation variables. Other deletion stages contain both strategic and tactical elements. When considering revitalisation and implementation, for instance, both strategic and tactical elements are present – the decision to revitalise a product or implement a deletion plan is strategic; however, how this occurs is clearly tactical. A potentially more problematic area is distribution. Webster (1992, 2005) indicates that distribution is a tactical consideration. Nevertheless, within the deletion context, distribution can also be seen as strategically relevant, for example, with respect to the development of new markets. Bearing these issues in mind, Figure I provides an insight into the various components associated with each stage of the product deletion decision-making process.

For further information on the literature associated with each of the variables outlined in Figure I refer to the appropriate appendices.

Recognition of Deletion Candidates	Analysis & Revitalisation	Evaluation & Decision-Making	Implementation
Internal	Analysis	Financial
Position on PLC (S) Operational Issues (T) <i>(manufacturing, marketing, materials & product development costs, inventory issues, marketing efficiency)</i>	Superior Competitor Offerings (S) Product & Service Factors (T) <i>(product design and price)</i> Production Issues (T) <i>(production costs and complexities)</i>	Product Implications (S/T) <i>(current profits, profit trends)</i> Costs (S/T) <i>(product costs, joint costs)</i> Sales Implications (S/T)	
External	External Issues (S) <i>(customer requirements, economic trends)</i>	Marketing	
Market Trends (S) Market Share (S) Competition (S) <i>(competitors activities and offerings)</i>	Revitalisation	Impact on Full Line Policy (S) Impact on Image (S) Modification Potential (T)	
Financial	Product Modification (S/T)	Managerial	
Profit (S/T) <i>(general profitability and profitability trends)</i> Sales (S/T) <i>(sales trends, sales value, sales volume, product sales as a percentage of total sales)</i> Price (S/T) <i>(current price and price trends)</i> ROI (S/T)	Price (S/T) <i>(increase and decrease)</i> Promotional Activities (S/T) Distribution (S/T) <i>(changes to distribution channels, develop new markets)</i> Manufacturing Processes (S/T) <i>(improve production efficiency)</i>	Effect on Employee Relations (S/T) Potential Organised Intervention (S/T) Managerial Time Freed Up (S/T)	
		Alternatives	
		New Product Potential (S) Potential Resource Re-Allocation (T) Availability of Substitute Products (S/T)	
		External	
		Impact on Customer Relations (S) Competitors Reaction (S) Impact on Distribution <i>(possible channel member reaction)</i> Market Position (S) <i>(current & future market trends)</i>	
Appendix 2	Appendix 3	Appendix 4	Appendix 5

Figure 1: The product deletion process – recurring deletion variables

Additional issues and cultural considerations

The literature analysis revealed four recurring cultural issues (e.g. types of behaviour) influencing product deletion decision-making, namely the frequency of deletion activities, participants in the process, formality of the process and the socio-political influences on deletion decision-making. The following discussion draws on the findings from the literature and highlights the central themes associated with each of these cultural considerations. In order to provide a contemporary insight the information contained in the literature is compared to the experiences of the three case study organisations.

Frequency

The frequency with which organisations engage in product deletion activities has been subject to ongoing debate. Hise and McGinnis (1975) and Hise, Parasuraman and Viswanathan (1984) commenting on two separate studies, purported that 62% and 79% of the Fortune 500 organisations sampled reviewed their products' performance at least annually. In contrast to this, Avlonitis and James (1982) and Avlonitis (1986) found that less than a third of industrial goods manufacturers operating in the engineering sector reviewed

their product portfolios on a regular basis. A diligent approach, reviewing product portfolios on a 'regular', 'periodic' and/or 'ongoing' basis, is recommended by several authors (Rothe, 1970; Worthing, 1975; Salerno, 1982; Avlonitis 1986, 1987; Boltin and Gorneau, 1998). However, as Hart (1990), Snelson and Hart (1991) and Vyas (1993) suggest, such diligence should perhaps be tempered by need, with organisations engaging in deletion activities as and when new products are introduced. The data from Mop, Tablet and Cake provides a further insight into the frequency with which organisations engage in product deletion activities. In the case study organisations product performance is reviewed on a regular basis. This trend toward regular product reviews does not, however, lead on to regular product deletions. Informants from all three organisations indicate that the actual deletion of a product is something of a rarity (informants 5, 6, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18) with product deletion generally related to the introduction of new products. For example, in Mop the introduction of a new product prompts the product deletion process: 'Every time you bring in new SKUs [stock keeping units] one should go out' (informant 13). Within the case study organisations there appears to be a belief in the need for regular product portfolio reviews. However, there also appears to be a degree of hesitation with deletion activities occurring only when strictly necessary. As such, when deletion occurs the candidate is easily identifiable. In Cake, deletion tends to occur every three to four years with a situation prevailing whereby 'by the time we come to delete something the [deletion] candidate is going "it's me" [and] we all know that's the one that's got to go' (informant 17). Managers from Mop convey similar opinions with product deletion likely to occur when a product is unsalvageable or in one manager's words 'dead' (informant 14).

Formality

Writing from a theoretical perspective, several authors postulated that the majority of organisations approach product deletion decision-making in a haphazard, *ad hoc* manner (Alexander, 1964; Kotler, 1965; Hamelman and Mazze, 1972; Michael, 1971). Empirical studies from the 1970s and 1980s found that less than a third of the Fortune 500 organisations involved had a deletion decision-making procedure in print (Hise and McGinnis, 1975; Hise, Parasuraman and Visanathan, 1984). This *ad hoc* approach to deletion decision-making appears to remain in today's environment, as similar trends emerge from two of the three case study organisations. Within Tablet: 'We don't really have a policy, what we have is a series of initiatives that when a number of SKUs get too many or too complex somebody will say, oh we need to do an exercise here' (informant 6). Similarly in Cake: 'We are not formalised and rigid . . . I don't have a piece of paper or a process that we go through' (informant 18). Should organisations be concerned about the lack of a formalised approach to deletion decision-making? It would appear so, as organisations adopting a more formalised approach are more likely to identify poorly performing products (Avlonitis, 1985). They are also more likely to emphasise courses of action other than deletion, consider the re-allocation of resources and the impact of deletion on marketing, social and ethical issues.

Further, a formalised approach allows for: 'Much less chance of retaining unprofitable or obsolete products' (Avlonitis 1985, p. 50). It is, as such, unsurprising that within the two case study organisations previously mentioned, there has, in recent years, been a change towards a more formalised deletion decision-making process (informants 2, 4, 5, 9, 17).

While a formalised approach can be advantageous there is a suggestion that the degree of formality should be tempered by organisational circumstances. An informant from Mop indicated that: 'Each franchise [product] has a different level of complexity and different issues and opportunities to deal with' (informant 14). Thus, in the case study organisations a culture pervades whereby the formalised approach to deletion decision-making is modified in accordance with individual circumstances with formal processes often used alongside a more informal, often intuitive, decision-making style.

Participation

Theoretically, a range of departmental opinions should be sought prior to deleting a product (Browne and Kemp, 1976; Boltin and Gorneau, 1998). Empirical studies appear to verify this stance (Avlonitis, 1983, 1984, 1986a; Vyas, 1993; Greenley and Bayus, 1994). Table 2 offers a detailed summary on the differing viewpoints as to who should be involved in product deletion decision-making.

The findings from the recent study concur with the conceptual and empirical literature indicating that representatives from a number of managerial disciplines are likely to be involved in the deletion decision-making process: 'it's a multi-functional thing' (informant 14) involving a: 'vast diversion of views' (informant 4). However, the marketing department (Rothe, 1970; Hise and McGinnis, 1975; Avlonitis, 1984, 1985; Lambert and Sterling, 1985; Hart, 1990; Vyas, 1993; Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas, 2000) and the accounting and finance department (Rothe, 1970; Lambert and Sterling, 1985; Avlonitis, 1984, 1985) appear to be frequently involved. This trend is noted in the case study organisations and succinctly conveyed by a marketing manager from Tablet who states: 'Marketing and financial arguments will drive what is being manufactured' (informant 7). Interestingly, only a small number of studies comment on customer involvement in deletion decision-making (e.g. Avlonitis, 1983a, 1984; Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas, 2000). In all of the case study organisations, however, customers (e.g. major retailers) are likely to be consulted prior to the deletion of a product or involved in the deletion decision-making (informants 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18). As one informant states: 'We involve them [customers] early on . . . we give them an opportunity to be proactively involved' (informant 17). This may be an artefact of the sector considered. With the rise of relationship marketing, customer involvement in deletion decision-making is unlikely to be restricted to a single sector.

Socio-political activities

The decision to delete a product can mark a change for an organisation and its employees (e.g. the way resources are allocated, employees' job descriptions

Table 2: Departmental involvement in deletion decision-making – conceptual and empirical insights

	Marketing	Finance	Sales	Manufacturing	Product Managers	Personnel	R&D	Customers
CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE								
Houfek (1952)	• Market Research Manager		•	•				
Alexander (1964)	•	•		•		•		
Kotler (1965)	•	•		•		•	•	
Mateja (1987)	•	•	•	•				
EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE								
Rothe (1970)	•							
Hise & McGinnis (1975)	•				•			Informed of a decision, but not involved
Kratchman, Hise and Ulrich (1975)	•	•						
Hise, Parasuraman and Viswanathan (1984)	•		•		•			
Avlonitis & James (1982)			•					

Avlonitis (1983)	•			•		•	Informed of a decision, but not involved
Avlonitis (1983a)							•
Avlonitis (1984) (paper relates to the evaluation stage)	•	•		•			•
Avlonitis (1985a)	•						
Avlonitis (1985) (paper relates to the analysis and revitalization stage)		•		•			
Lambert and Sterling (1985)	•	•		•			
Avlonitis (1986a and 1986)	•			•		•	
Hart (1990)	•	•		•		• Technical and Design Depts.	
Vyas (1993)	•			•			Informed of a decision, but not involved
Avlonitis, Hart & Tzokas (2000)		•		•		•	•

and their position within an organisation). These changes may trigger a degree of concern and negative emotions, perhaps requiring employees to address previous inadequacies, and/or disconfirming previously held beliefs (Hise and McGinnis, 1975; Burnes, 2000; Huy, 2002). It is therefore hardly surprising that the decision to delete a product is often met with resistance. While numerous reasons for this have been suggested, one common theme is employees' sentimental/emotional attachment to deletion candidates (Alexander, 1964; Kotler, 1965; Weller and Inst, 1969; Johnson, 1975; Worthing, 1975; Avlonitis, 1986a). As Michael (1971; p. 8) states, managers may be somewhat hesitant to delete a product seen as 'an old favourite, once glamorous to develop and exciting to sell, with careers and fortunes made by it and tied to it'. Similar trends are noted in the case study organisations (informants 1, 6, 17, 19) with managers from Tablet coming up against opposition from product champions. Similarly, a board member from Cake comments that with one product it 'should have been deleted ages ago on the basis of sales, but we sort of have an emotional attachment to it' (informant 17).

Opposition to product deletion often emanates from the sales department (Bereson, 1963; Alexander, 1964; Rothe, 1970; Johnson, 1975; Browne and Kemp, 1976; Avlonitis, 1984, 1986a, 1993). Similar trends are found in the case studies with a respondent offering the following edifying comment: 'Sales people like to have as broad a product offering as possible, the more they have to sell, the more secure they are. If they have a tight range of things the danger in their mind is that if somebody doesn't want that tight range they haven't got anywhere else to go. If somebody says I don't want that, the salesman's view is how about this/that, out comes the catalogue' (informant 5). Objection to product deletion does not, however, rest solely within the organisation as customers may oppose the decision to delete a product (Bereson, 1963; Alexander, 1964; Johnson, 1975; Avlonitis, 1983a, 1984, 1986a, 1993). The case study organisations deal with a number of outlets including major retail stores, individual grocers, delicatessens (in the case of Cake) and pharmacies (in the case of Tablet). These varying customers have differing opinions on, and reactions to, product deletion. The major retailers are seen to welcome product deletion as 'they want less product on shelves earning more money so they're not going to disagree' (informant 2). However, such support is not typical of the smaller independent customers: 'Independents and possibly our own stores don't want products to go because they always have a customer' (informant 17). Each stage of the deletion decision-making process is likely to be influenced by subjective managerial judgement, informal discussions and persuasion (Avlonitis and James, 1982; Avlonitis, 1984, 1986a). Vyas (1993) drew similar conclusions highlighting the 'politicking' of product deletion. The case studies reveal socio-political trends with the vast majority of informants indicating that organisational employees are likely to use their expertise, authority, coercive abilities and network perception, their knowledge of 'people that make a difference' (informant 9) in order to both encourage and deter product deletion. It appears that a culture pervades whereby the unique circumstances encountered, and/or opposition from key stakeholders, contributes to a situation where deletion processes and procedures are balanced by the use of personal power and political acumen.

Theoretical discussion

For organisations like Mop, Tablet and Cake operating in the FMCG sector product deletion is an increasingly important issue. Carlisle and Parker's (1989) three phase distributor/supplier relations model provides a possible explanation as to why this is the case.

Traditionally, retailers and manufacturers operated at arm's length with no one party dominating. Instead, the numerous buyers and suppliers would trade off each other (Carlisle and Parker, 1989) with retailers being seen as 'inert conduits' within the distribution process (Howe, 1998). Recently the retail sector has gone through a period of consolidation and concentration (Kotzab and Teller, 2003) with a small number of retailers becoming increasingly influential (Olver and Farris, 1989; Howe, 1998). For example, in the UK grocery sector multiple retailers (i.e. those with ten or more stores) have increased their market share from 20% in 1950 (Howe, 1998) to a situation where four retailers currently control approximately 76% of the market (Sanderson, 2008). A similar trend has been noted across Western Europe (Dawson and Shaw, 1990).

In the face of one party (e.g. retailers) gaining a 'dominant position' Carlisle and Parker (1989) indicate that those involved will try to consolidate and/or improve their 'power position'. Currently, product deletion is playing a key role in this power play. Manufacturers have started to appreciate that high equity brands (e.g. well managed manufacturers' brands) can increase the value of retailers' own brands (Simmons, Bickart and Buchanan, 2000) helping to bolster the retailers' image (Mantrala, *et al.*, 2009) while providing consumers with a means for comparison between manufacturer and retail brands (Grant, 2005). Manufacturers' also appreciate that the availability of key brands in store can influence consumers' retail store allegiances (Quelch and Harding, 1996). Unsurprisingly manufacturers have drawn on the aforementioned advantages in order to redress the balance of power. This involves the deletion of peripheral products and the subsequent focus on a smaller number of 'strong non-imitable brands' these being 'the best defence for manufacturers facing retailers' (Corstjens and Cortsjens, 1995; p. 61).

Carlisle and Parker's (1989) distributor/supplier relationship model contains a third stage involving a move toward joint activities and the pursuit of mutual benefits/partnerships by those involved. Hogarth-Scott and Parkinson (1993) were sceptical of such partnerships. Howe (1998) and Blois (1997) indicate that if such partnerships do develop they tend to be one sided affairs with the retailers very much in control. However, should we be so sceptical? The deletion of marginal products and the development of a select number of strong sought after brands combined with the need for retailers to deliver high quality products in a timely manner could mark the start of mutual relationships based on trust and collaboration (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). Hingley (2005) citing the work of Palmer (2000, 2002) and Cox (1999) suggests otherwise. Instead, organisations just like individuals are seen to be driven by Darwinian-like principles (e.g. self interest, continued survival) not collaboration and mutuality. As such, the current emphasis on product deletion and the shift to more concise product portfolios could merely be seen as the

latest episode in the ever changing retailer/manufacturer power balance, with manufacturers using a potential product advantage to redress retailers' dominance (Ford, 1982).

Managerial implications

In order to provide managers with a comprehensive and practical insight into the product deletion process the relevant literature and the interview transcripts from Mop, Cake and Tablet were subject to further analysis. Rather than identify variables associated with each stage of the deletion process the aim was to extract recurrence pieces of advice/best practice appertaining to product deletion. Such information was gleaned from twenty academic papers published between 1964 and 1998 and 19 of the 23 informants. Figure 2 highlights the recurring pieces of advice/best practice. Given that two of the three organisations are industry leaders (with the third organisation a significant player in the sector) the information provided can help form the foundations of industry specific critical success factors (Leidecker and Bruno, 1984) and as such prove valuable for organisations in each of the relevant sectors.

Research limitations

In considering the recurring deletion variables significant use was made of historical literature, a retrospective approach which has some drawbacks. However, there is a need to appreciate the research context (Baker and Bettner, 1997). The aim is not to offer an industry specific or generic insight into how deletion decision-making should be addressed. Those wishing to pursue this may consult the appendices. Instead the aim is to highlight and discuss recurring issues that have emerged over nearly six decades. Another limitation already noted is the focus on a small number of FMCG organisations. This is claimed to be appropriate for exploratory study aimed at later theory building and testing. However, this affects the wider applicability and generalisation of the findings pending further investigation.

Conclusions

The paper provides food for thought in relation to a number of strategic, tactical and cultural issues associated with product deletion. On the strategic level it appears that in spite of potential problems associated with an extensive product portfolio (Alexander, 1964; Kotler, 1965), the proactive management of the product deletion process is, for the most part, a relatively new phenomenon. In the light of the recent interest in product portfolio management the clarification of the recurring variables associated with each stage of the product deletion decision-making process and the disclosure of further factors influencing deletion decision-making is timely. As Taylor (2008, p. 13) suggests: 'If you don't get ruthless with your non-core products, you may end up watching someone else . . . do it for you'.

1. ***Treat Product Deletion as an On-Going Strategic Activity:*** Do not view product portfolio assessment and deletion activities as a major event carried out every few years and/or when the organization faces a crisis. Instead incorporate product portfolio analysis and deletion considerations into the organisation's on-going strategic decision making activities.
2. ***Pragmatic Deletion Decision-Making:*** Where appropriate establish deletion decision making processes. However do not adopt a generic approach to deletion decision making, appreciate and accommodate the unique contextual conditions surrounding each deletion decision making scenario.
3. ***Ensure Deletion Decisions Are Based on Reliable, Relevant Data:*** When considering the costs associated with each product take into account all the non-arbitrary, marketing and manufacturing costs on a product-by-product basis.
4. ***Clearly Define Deletion Decision-Making Responsibilities:*** Establish clear deletion decision-making responsibilities within the organisation. Deletion decision making should involve senior managers
5. ***Draw on a Wide Range of Opinions:*** When considering deletion activities information should be gleaned from a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.
6. ***Do Not Neglect Customers and Consumers:*** When deleting a product customers should be kept informed of any decisions made. The degree of customer involvement should, however, be managed to ensure the organization maintains control over the make-up of the portfolio. Similarly consumer concerns need to be addressed with consideration being given to the consumer characteristics (e.g. how attractive and loyal are the consumers?) In the event of a product being deleted can consumers be directed toward a similar product produced by the organization?
7. ***Co-Ordinate New Product Development and Product Deletion Activities:*** Unless circumstances allow (e.g. rapid growth in a particular sector) look to delete a product as/when new products are introduced.

Figure 2: Key considerations in product deletion decision-making

Appendix I: Organisation classification scheme

Sector	Abbreviation	Examples
Fast Moving Consumer Goods	FMCG	snacks, soft drinks, razor blades
Industrial Operating Supplies	IOS	dry groceries proprietary pharmacies, small hardware items, industrial operating supplies
Consumer Durables	CD	televisions, major household appliances, tyres, major sporting/athletic equipment
Industrial Components	IC	heavy farm machinery
Capital Equipment	CE	electric generators, turbines, specialised machine tools
All of the Above	ALL	

Appendix II: Product deletion recognition

Author	Sector(s) and Sample Size	Internal Recognition Variable			External Recognition Variable			Financial Recognition Variable		
		Position on PLC	Operational issues	Profit	Market share	Competition	Market trends	Sales	Price	ROI
Houfek (1952)	Conceptual		•	•				•		
Hurst (1959)	Conceptual		•	•		•			•	
Sonnecken and Hurst (1960)	Conceptual		•	•		•				
Alexander (1964)	Conceptual			•		•		•	•	
Kotler (1965)	Conceptual			•			•			
Clayton (1966)	Conceptual	•	•					•	•	•
Rothe (1970)	150 IOS, CD, FMCG		•	•	•			•		
Eckles (1971)	IOS, CD		•	•		•	•	•		
BCG (1972)	NA				•		•			
Hamelman and Mazze (1972)	Conceptual		•						•	
Fluitman (1973)	Conceptual		•					•		•

Appendix III: Analysis and revitalisation of deletion candidates

Author	Sector(s) and Sample	Analysis				Revitalisation				
		Competitor offerings	Product and service factors	Production issues	External issues	Product modification	Price	Promotional activities	Distribution	Manufacturing process
Houfek (1952)	Conceptual					•				
Hurst (1959)	Conceptual					•				
Alexander (1964)	Conceptual					•	•	•	•	•
Weller and Inst (1969)	Conceptual						•	•	•	
Eckles (1971)	IOS, CD								•	
Hamelman and Mazze (1972)	Conceptual						•			
Business Week (1974)	Conceptual					•				
Hise and McGinnis (1975)	96 Fortune 500 manufacturing organisations					•		•	•	

Appendix IV: The evaluation of potential deletion candidates

Author	Sector(s) and Sample	Financial					Marketing			Managerial			Alternatives			External			
		Profit implications	Costs	Sales implications	Impact on fixed and working capital	Impact on other products	Impact on full line policy	Impact on image	Product modification potential	Effect on employee relations	Potential organised intervention	Managerial time freed up	New product potential	Potential resource re-allocation	Availability of substitute products	Impact on customer relations	Competitor reaction	Impact on distribution	Market position
Bereson (1963)	Conceptual	•				•	•	•		•	•					•		•	•
Alexander (1964)	Conceptual	•		•	•	•	•			•	•			•					
Kotler (1965)	Conceptual		•		•	•			•	•		•		•					•
Rothe (1970)	150 IOS, CD, FMCG	•	•											•					•
Eckles (1971)	IOS, CD	•	•		•		•						•						
Hamel and Mazze (1972)	Conceptual					•	•								•				
Pletcher (1973)	21 CD	•	•	•		•	•	•	•			•	•		•			•	•
Business Week (1974)	Conceptual															•			
Kotler (1974)	Conceptual		•			•													
Banville and Pletcher (1974)	21 CD	•	•	•		•	•	•	•			•	•		•			•	•
Worthing (1975)	Conceptual	•	•			•													
Browne and Kemp (1976)	Conceptual				•	•		•		•								•	

Appendix V: Deletion decision – implementation

Author	Sector(s)	Sell as ongoing concern	Phase out immediately	Phase out slowly/ milk	Harvest
Hirst (1959)	Conceptual			•	
Alexander (1964)	Conceptual	•	•		
Talley (1964)	Conceptual				•
Kotler (1965)	Conceptual	•		•	
Rothe (1970)	150 IOS, CD, FMCG			•	
Eckles (1971)	IOS, CD		•	•	
Michael (1971)	Conceptual				•
Wind and Claycamp (1976)	Conceptual		•	•	
Kotler (1978)	Conceptual				•
Avlonitis (1983)	94 IOS, IC, CE	•	•	•	
Avlonitis (1986a)	94 IOS, IC, CE	•		•	
Mateja (1987)	Conceptual		•		
Bereson, Mohr-Jackson (1994)	Conceptual	•			•
Boltin and Gorneau (1998)	Conceptual				•
Avlonitis, Hart and Tzokas (2000)	156 ALL	•	•	•	
Muir (2006)	3 FMCG	•	•	•	

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