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Professional management as a source of competitiveness for small supermarkets in the face of food retail concentration.

Professional management as a source of competitiveness for small supermarkets in the face of food retail concentration

Professional management as a source of competitiveness of a small supermarket compared to the concentration of minority food trade

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of large supermarket chains has altered the structure of food retail and increased competitive pressure on small and medium-sized supermarkets. This article discusses to what extent the adoption of professional management practices can sustain the competitiveness of these establishments, regardless of their size. The research is qualitative in nature, exploratory and descriptive in character, and was conducted through a narrative literature review in retail economics, operations management, strategy, and cooperation networks, complemented by institutional studies on micro and small enterprises in Brazil. The analysis was organized into six axes, which address the concentration of food retail, management practices as a factor of productivity, indicators and financial control, process standardization, people management, and cooperation between companies. The studies examined indicate that differences in management practices explain a significant part of the differences in productivity, profitability, and survival among companies, including smaller ones, and that information barriers hinder the adoption of these practices. It can be concluded that small supermarkets cannot compete with large chains on a large scale, but they can reduce this disadvantage through management based on indicators, standardized processes, qualified teams, and participation in cooperative networks.

Keywords: Small retail. Supermarkets. Management practices. Competitiveness. Cooperative networks.

ABSTRACT The

expansion of large supermarket chains has changed the structure of food retailing and increased competitive pressure on small and medium-sized supermarkets. This article discusses the extent to which the adoption of professional management practices can sustain the competitiveness of these stores regardless of their size. The research is qualitative, exploratory and descriptive, and was carried out through a narrative literature review in retail economics, operations management, strategy and cooperation networks, complemented by institutional studies on micro and small enterprises in Brazil.

The analysis was organized into six axes, addressing food retail concentration, management practices as a productivity factor, indicators and financial control, process standardization, people management and inter-firm cooperation. The studies examined indicate that differences in management practices explain a relevant share of differences in productivity, profitability and survival among firms, including smaller ones, and that information barriers hinder the adoption of these practices. It is concluded that small supermarkets cannot compete with large chains on scale, but can reduce their disadvantage through indicator-based management, standardized processes, qualified teams and participation in cooperation networks.

Keywords: Small retail. Supermarkets. Management practices. Competitiveness. Cooperation networks.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Latin American food retail sector has undergone a structural transformation in recent decades. of great scope. Reardon and Berdegué (2002) estimated that the participation of supermarkets in Retail food sales in the region increased from between 10% and 20% in 1990 to around 50%. and 60% in 2000, a change that, according to the authors, took about fifty years to occur in US retail. The same study noted that the main losers in this process Small traditional shops and neighborhood markets were affected, with the closure of thousands of... establishments in countries where expansion was most intense, including Brazil. Farina (2002) analyzed the Brazilian case and showed that the consolidation and internationalization of the sector Supermarkets have reduced the role of traditional wholesale markets in the produce supply chain. They stimulated the emergence of specialized wholesalers and distribution centers and demanded from Small producers and businesses: organizational and technological improvements. This move put the small supermarket in competition with those who had greater purchasing power. investment capacity in technology and specialized administrative structures that he does not It can reproduce. The question that arises is whether there is sustainable competitive space for these. establishments and, if so, what their occupancy depends on. Recent literature on Economics and management offers an important clue by showing that differences in management practices They explain a significant part of the performance differences between companies in the same sector, including among small businesses. If management matters as much as these studies suggest, the disadvantage The scale of the small retailer can be partially offset by more efficient management. professional.

Based on this premise, the objective of this article is to discuss to what extent the adoption of practices Management professionals can support the competitiveness of small and medium-sized supermarkets. facing the large networks. The text is organized into six analytical axes, preceded by the description. of the methodological approach. The first contextualizes the concentration of food retail, the four The following sections examine specific dimensions of management, and the last one deals with cooperation between companies. as a way to gain economies of scale. The conclusion summarizes the findings and indicates possibilities. for future research.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research is characterized as qualitative in its approach and as exploratory and descriptive.

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Regarding the objectives, according to Gil (2017), exploratory research aims to...
to provide greater familiarity with the problem, with a view to making it more explicit, while the
Descriptive analyses aim to characterize a specific population or phenomenon. The topic under analysis brings together...
contributions from areas that rarely interact with each other, such as retail economics and management of
operations, strategy theory, and studies on interorganizational networks, which justifies a
An effort at conceptual approximation before any attempt at measurement.
As a technical procedure, bibliographic research in the form of a narrative review was adopted.
Rother (2007) defines this type of review as suitable for describing and discussing development.
or the state of the art of a given subject from a theoretical or contextual point of view,
distinguishing it from systematic review, which follows a rigid protocol of search and synthesis. The choice for
The narrative review stems from the article's objective, which is to integrate evidence from diverse fields around...
of a managerial problem, and not to estimate the average effect of a specific intervention by means of
Statistical aggregation techniques.
The material was identified in the SciELO, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, with
Portuguese and English terms related to management practices, small business productivity,
Retail concentration, expansion of large chains, retail execution, process standardization.
Staff turnover and collaboration networks were considered. Articles published in journals were prioritized.
with peer review, experimental studies and reference works in strategy and management of
quality. Additionally, a study of the Brazilian Service for Support to Micro and Small Enterprises was included.
Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) on business survival, by offering national data with
methodology described publicly.
The analysis followed the steps of exploratory, selective, analytical, and interpretive reading. The texts were
grouped by thematic affinity, giving rise to the six axes of development. In each axis,
The aim was to relate the empirical findings to the implications for the management of small supermarkets.
As a limitation, it is acknowledged that a significant portion of the available empirical evidence on practices
Managerial expertise stems from industrial sectors or countries with characteristics distinct from those of Brazil.
which calls for caution in generalizing the results and reinforces the need for applied studies to
national retail.

3. The Concentration of Food Retail and the Position of Small Businesses SUPERMARKET

The expansion of supermarkets in Latin America was not just an increase in the number of stores,

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but a reorganization of the way food is bought, distributed, and sold. Reardon
Berdegué (2002) describes this process as a result of the combination of urbanization,
Increased income, inflow of foreign capital, and changes in consumption habits. The authors
They observe that large retail chains have begun to centralize purchases and to prefer specialized suppliers.
and to impose private quality standards, which gave them cost and standardization advantages.
difficult to match. In Brazil, the study indicates that supermarkets already accounted for the largest share.
of food retail in the early 2000s, although its share in fresh fruits and vegetables
was smaller.

This last piece of data has strategic importance. According to Reardon and Berdegué (2002), participation
The share of supermarkets in sales of fresh fruits and vegetables in Brazil was around 50% in the plan.
nationally and approximately 30% in the São Paulo region, well below that observed in products
processed. The authors also noted that Brazilian market vendors and small merchants were
modernizing its facilities and improving the quality of its products to compete, with support from
trade associations. These findings indicate that, in categories where quality
As perceived, freshness and proximity matter more than scale; small retail stores preserve space.
competitive, as long as it is able to deliver a consistent standard.
International literature on the expansion of large networks helps to illustrate the pressure on them.
smaller establishments. Basker (2005) studied the effects of Walmart's entry on employment.
in North American counties and found that the arrival of the chain increased retail employment in
around one hundred jobs were created in the first year, but half of that gain disappeared within five years.
following, as other retail establishments closed or retracted. Jia (2008), with
Based on a structural model of the discount retail industry, it estimated that Walmart's expansion...
The period between the late 1980s and the late 1990s explains approximately 40% to 50% of the net change in
number of small discount retailers during the period.
These studies do not imply that small retailers are doomed to disappear, but
They indicate that competing directly on the terms of the large retail chains means offering sustained low prices.
By scale, it is rarely feasible. Porter (2004) argues that competitive advantage can be obtained
through cost leadership, differentiation, or focus on a specific market segment, and
The company that tries to fill all positions at once risks running out of jobs.
None. For the small supermarket, differentiation and focus strategies seem more...
promising, whether due to geographical proximity, personalized service, or quality of
sections focused on perishable goods or knowledge of local customer preferences.
Differentiation, however, is not based solely on intention. Barney (1991) argues that the

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Sustainable competitive advantage depends on resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and...
without equivalent substitutes. Physical proximity and customer relationships can be
Resources of this nature are valuable, but they lose value if the store experiences frequent stockouts, low-quality
products, misaligned pricing, or inconsistent customer service. It is at this point that professional management becomes crucial.
It becomes crucial. It is the means by which the potential resources of the small supermarket are realized.
They translate into a real advantage, perceived by the consumer and reflected in the company's results.

4 Management Practices as Determinants of Productivity

For a long time, economics treated management differences as a difficult-to-find residual issue.
measurement. Bloom and Van Reenen (2007) changed this scenario by developing a methodology
from interviews capable of measuring the quality of management practices in 732 industrial companies of
Medium-sized animals in the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The authors verified
that management scores were strongly associated with productivity, profitability, and
sales growth and business survival. They also found that, in all
the countries, with a long tail of very poorly managed companies, most frequent where the
Competition was weak, and family businesses often passed the leadership to the eldest son.
The association between management and performance could, in principle, simply reflect the fact that companies
The most successful companies have more resources to invest in management. To address this question,
Bloom et al. (2013) conducted a field experiment with large textile companies in India, offering free consulting on
management practices to a select group of factories.
Randomly. The adoption of recommended practices increased productivity by 17% in the first
That year, the companies involved went on to open more units in the following years. The authors concluded
that information barriers were the main factor explaining why these practices did not
They had been adopted before.

Similar evidence was obtained for smaller companies. Bruhn, Karlan, and Schoar (2018) conducted
a randomized trial with 432 small and medium-sized enterprises in Mexico, which were offered a
year of management consulting. The results showed a positive effect on the overall productivity of
factors regarding return on assets, in addition to a persistent increase of approximately 50% in the number
of employees and on the payroll, measured five years after the program. The authors observed
that the improved practices varied considerably from one company to another, with particular emphasis on
marketing, financial accounting, and long-term planning, which suggests that every business
It has its own management gaps that need to be identified.

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In the microenterprise segment, McKenzie and Woodruff (2017) developed a set of 26 questions about marketing practices, inventory control, accounting records, and planning. financial, applied to surveys conducted in seven developing countries. The authors They found that differences in these practices explain the variation in sales, profits, and productivity. among micro-enterprises, the magnitude is comparable to that observed among larger companies. With data in A panel of three countries also showed that best practices predict higher survival rates and Faster sales growth, even when controlling for various measures of human capital. from the owner.

This body of evidence allows for a relevant conclusion for the small supermarket. A Management is not a luxury reserved for large organizations, but a measurable factor of productivity. whose effect is also evident in small businesses. The finding of Bloom et al. (2013) The idea that information barriers explain the low adoption of best practices is particularly relevant. This is important because it suggests that many small retailers fail to adopt them not out of inability, but due to a lack of awareness of its impact. This gives a central role to the dissemination of knowledge. managerial through business associations, consulting firms and training programs aimed at sector.

5 Indicators and Financial Control in Decision Making

Among the management practices examined by McKenzie and Woodruff (2017), accounting records and the Financial planning emerges as a fundamental dimension, precisely because without information... Reliable on revenues, costs, and margins, the entrepreneur is unable to assess the consequences of their decisions. In small supermarkets, financial monitoring is often limited to cash balance and short-term liabilities, without periodic calculation of results by section, of Effective margin after losses and return on capital invested in inventory. This limitation makes it so that that structural problems, such as a systematically deficient section, remain hidden until... manifesting as cash flow difficulties.

Kaplan and Norton (1992) argued that financial measures, while indispensable, inform about the past and should be complemented by indicators relating to customers and internal processes. and learning, composing what they called *a balanced scorecard.* The central contribution of The authors' idea is that effective management requires a balanced set of indicators capable of revealing... not only the result, but the factors that produce it. For the small supermarket, this does not require Sophisticated systems, but the choice of few relevant indicators, such as margin per section, turnover.

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inventory levels, loss rates, stockouts, and average ticket size are monitored regularly and compared.
with explicit goals.

The importance of managerial control for the survival of companies is also supported by...
in national data. The Sebrae study (2016) on business survival in Brazil showed
that the two-year survival rate of companies incorporated in 2012 was 76.6%, both in
of the economy as a whole, as well as the trade sector, which means that about one in four
Companies ceased operations during this period. The same survey lists the main ones.
causes of mortality related to the preparation of entrepreneurs, business planning and management, and
It points to pre-opening planning and business management as factors that influence...
survival. Although the data refers to companies of all types, it highlights the fragility
Management issues pose a real risk to small retail businesses.

The quality of indicators depends on the quality of the data that feeds them, and the retail sector presents...
known weaknesses in this respect. DeHoratius and Raman (2008) examined approximately 370,000
Inventory records from 37 stores belonging to a retailer were analyzed, and it was found that 65% of them did not match the...
physically available quantity. The authors identified that inventory audit practices
They reduce imprecision, while the complexity of the store environment exacerbates it. For the small
supermarket, the result suggests that periodic inventories and systematic checks in
Receipts are not administrative formalities, but conditions for purchasing decisions and
Price comparisons should be based on accurate information.

There is also a behavioral aspect to consider. Indicators only produce an effect when they are...
used to guide decisions and define action plans, which presupposes a routine of analysis and a
responsible for each outcome. Bloom and Van Reenen (2007) included, among the management dimensions
evaluated, performance monitoring and goal setting, showing that companies that
Those who systematically monitor indicators and react to deviations tend to show better results.
results. Translated to the small supermarket, this finding recommends periodic meetings of
analysis, with the participation of those in charge of each section, in which the numbers are discussed and
converted into concrete actions.

6. STANDARDIZATION OF PROCESSES AND EXECUTION IN THE STORE

The tradition of quality management offers small retailers a set of principles that have been tested and proven.
over decades. Deming (1986) argued that most quality problems stem from
The focus should be on the work system, not the people, and improvement requires reducing variation in processes.

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through stable methods and continuous learning. Campos (1994), in a widely published work
Widely used in Brazil, it translated these principles into managing the daily work routine.
highlighting standardization as the foundation upon which improvement is built. For the author, without
Standard procedure: there is no way to assess whether a poor result stemmed from an execution failure or from...
deficiency of the method itself.

In retail, the gap between what is planned and what actually happens in the store has been termed
by Raman, DeHoratius, and Ton (2001) execution problem. The authors argued that many
Retailers invest in sophisticated planning systems, but fail to ensure that...
products are in the right place, in the right quantity, and at the right price, and that these failures of
The execution compromises the expected gains from the planning. For the small supermarket, which
It generally lacks advanced systems; the lesson is the opposite and equally important. The discipline
Performing simple routines, such as receiving, restocking, pricing, and checking, can generate...
returns that surpass those of any technological investment.

The relationship between standardization and performance was empirically examined by Ton and Huckman.
(2008), who analyzed 48 months of employee turnover data in stores of a large chain.
North American retailer. The authors found that turnover was associated with worse
performance, measured by profit margin and quality of service, but that this effect depended
of the store's management style. In stores where managers ensured compliance with processes.
In standardized systems, employee turnover did not significantly harm performance, whereas in stores
In cases where deviations were tolerated, the negative effect was pronounced. This finding is highly relevant.
for the retail sector, a sector with notoriously high turnover.

The continuous improvement approach complements standardization. Imai (1986) described *kaizen.*
such as the pursuit of gradual and permanent improvements, involving all levels of the organization, in
In contrast to innovation based on large investments. Womack and Jones (1996),
To systematize lean thinking, they proposed identifying what generates value for the customer, mapping
The flow of activities, eliminating waste, and continuously striving for perfection. These principles
They are especially suitable for small supermarkets, as they require more discipline and
Team involvement rather than capital, and can be applied to processes such as supply chain management.
Gondolas, perishable goods management, and checkout service.

Standardization, however, should not be confused with bureaucratic rigidity. The goal is to record...
The best known way to perform each task is to make it accessible to everyone and review it whenever necessary.
A superior method may emerge. In the context of a small supermarket, this could mean...
Written procedures for receiving goods, checklists for opening and

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Store closing, visual display standards for each section, and defined routines for product removal.
products with compromised quality. When the knowledge of how to do it is documented,
The company reduces its dependence on specific individuals and gains the conditions to grow without losing...
quality.

7 People and Leadership as a Strategic Resource

The resource-based view, formulated by Barney (1991), argues that competitive advantage
Enduring durability stems from internal resources that competitors cannot easily imitate.
Among these resources, the author includes human capital, formed by experience, judgment, and
through the relationships between the organization's members, and organizational capital, which encompasses systems of
planning, control, and coordination. Barney further notes that resources developed under planning, control, and coordination.
Unique historical conditions tend to be difficult to imitate. For the small supermarket, this...
Perspective is especially relevant. A team that knows its clientele, masters the...
Store procedures and shared service standards constitute an asset that cannot be lost.
Purchased ready-made by large retail chains, it cannot be transferred from one company to another without loss of value.
Ton (2014) challenged the idea that low-price retailing necessarily depends on jobs.
poorly paid and with little investment in personnel. When studying chains like Costco, Mercadona,
In the case of QuikTrip and Trader Joe's, the author identified that these companies combined investment in...
employees were given four operational choices, which consisted of offering less variety,
Standardize while simultaneously providing autonomy, train employees for multiple roles, and operate
with ample capacity. According to the author, these choices allowed the team to be more
productive, made fewer mistakes and provided better service, offsetting the higher personnel costs with
operational and sales gains.
Ton's (2014) contribution is relevant to small supermarkets because it shows that management
Human resource management is not a separate issue from operations management. Investing in training without standardization is pointless.
Standardized processes tend to yield limited results, as does standardizing processes without people.
capable of performing them. The results of Ton and Huckman (2008) reinforce this.
interdependence by showing that compliance with processes protects performance against
The effects of turnover. In a small company, where each employee represents a portion
As a significant part of the workforce, the loss of an experienced employee can affect the entire operation.
if the knowledge is not documented.

The role of middle management deserves specific attention. In small supermarkets,

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Section supervisors and store managers concentrate functions that are distributed in large retail chains.
between specialized departments, such as purchasing, inventory control, human resources and
customer service. The training of these leaders, therefore, has a multiplier effect on the performance of
McKenzie and Woodruff (2017) found that company owners with higher human capital...
They tend to adopt best practices, and Bloom et al. (2013) showed that the transfer of
Management knowledge produces rapid productivity gains. Extending this knowledge to
Intermediate leaders broaden the reach of practices beyond the owner.
Human resource management in small retail businesses still faces the challenge of reconciling the informality of...
relationships, characteristic of family businesses and smaller cities, with the need for criteria.
Clear evaluation and development guidelines. Bloom and Van Reenen (2007) included talent management.
Among the dimensions of management practices evaluated, encompassing how companies attract,
They develop, reward, and retain their employees, and have found that these practices also...
They are associated with performance. The definition of responsibilities, results-based evaluation, and...
The existence of prospects for internal growth are elements that, even on a small scale,
They contribute to the retention of good professionals.

8. Network Cooperation and Associationism as a Source of Scale

While scale is the main advantage of large networks, cooperation between small businesses emerges.
as a way to obtain some of these benefits without giving up independence. Balestrin and Verschoore
(2008) define cooperation networks as organizations formed by companies that maintain their
They have legal individuality, but act in a coordinated manner in activities such as joint purchases,
Shared marketing, capacity building, and the development of common solutions. The authors note
This form of organization allows small businesses to achieve economies of scale and power.
Market access, solutions, and collective learning that they would hardly obtain in isolation.
The state of Rio Grande do Sul is a benchmark case in this field, due to its state program of...
promoting cooperation networks. Verschoore and Balestrin (2008) conducted a quantitative study with
443 representatives from companies belonging to 120 state cooperation networks, using the technique
joint analysis to identify the most valued factors in the decision to participate in a network.
The results indicated that the most relevant factors were learning and innovation, and gains.
scale and market power and access to solutions. The centrality of learning among these
This factor is significant because it shows that networks also function as channels for the dissemination of
Management knowledge sharing among companies.

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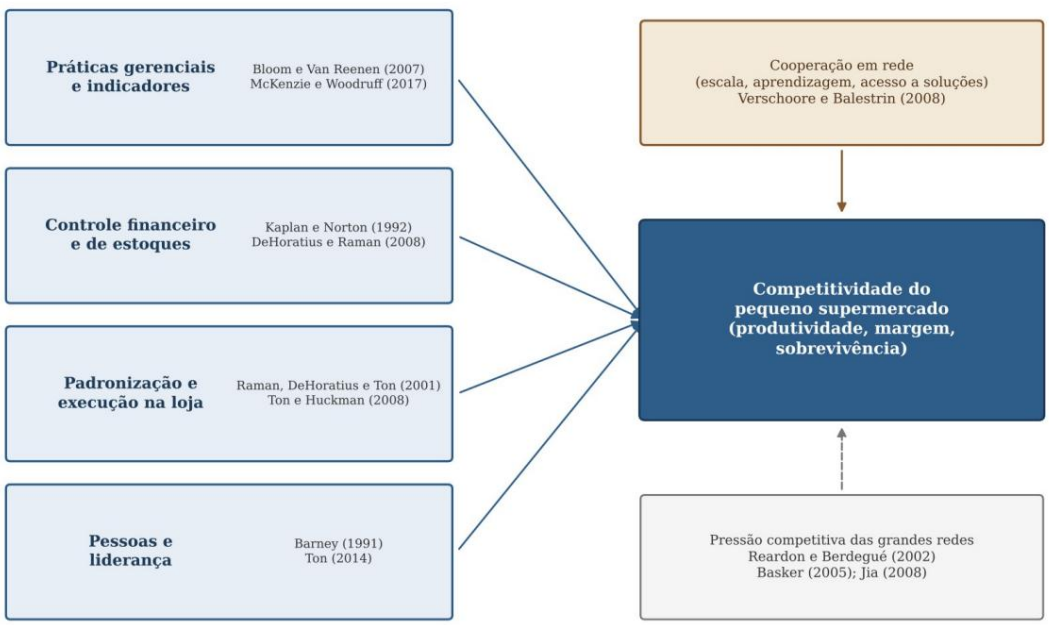
This aspect directly relates to the findings of Bloom et al. (2013), according to whom barriers
Lack of information explains a large part of the low adoption of effective management practices. If the main
The difficulty for small businesses is not a lack of resources, but a lack of knowledge of best practices and
As a result of their effects, cooperation networks, business associations, and employers' unions can...
to play a relevant role in promoting the exchange of experiences and the carrying out of joint training sessions.
and the comparison of indicators among associates. Reardon and Berdegué (2002) had already noted that
Trade associations in Brazil supported the modernization of street vendors and small retailers.
In the face of the growth of supermarkets.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model that emerges from the review conducted in this article. In it, the
Management practices and indicators, financial and inventory control, standardization and execution.
In-store operations, people management and leadership emerge as internal dimensions that, combined,
They support the competitiveness of small supermarkets. Network cooperation acts as a factor.
complementary, expanding the scale and accelerating learning, while the competitive pressure of
Large networks constitute the context that makes these dimensions necessary. The model does not intend
to establish tested causal relationships, but to organize the contributions from the literature in a way that is useful to
research and practice.

Figure 1 – Conceptual model of management dimensions associated with the competitiveness of small businesses.
supermarket



Source: compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature.

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Participation in networks and associations, however, does not replace the internal management of each company. The benefits of a purchasing center, for example, only translate into results if the company... The associated company should have inventory control capable of preventing excesses, and indicators that allow for the evaluation of... profitability of purchased products and processes that ensure the correct display and sale of goods. Similarly, the learning provided by the network depends on the ability to Each entrepreneur should absorb and apply the knowledge received. Cooperation, in this sense, It enhances professional management, but presupposes its existence, establishing a relationship of complementarity between the dimensions presented in Figure 1.

9 CONCLUSION

This article discussed the extent to which the adoption of professional management practices can support the Competitiveness of small and medium-sized supermarkets in the face of the expansion of large chains. The literature review supported the premise that the disadvantage of scale of small Retail is a reality, but it doesn't solely determine its own fate. The quality of management explains a significant portion of the problem. The relevant differences in performance between companies constitute the main field of... Action available to small business owners. Analysis of food retail concentration showed that the process was rapid and intense in America. Latin America, with significant effects on small businesses, and which international literature records. Similar impacts in markets where large networks have expanded. At the same time, the data Studies on fresh fruits and vegetables indicated that small retailers maintained a significant market share. in categories where quality, freshness, and proximity matter more than scale, provided that supported by a consistent operating pattern. Evidence regarding management practices, including experimental evidence, has shown that... Management increases productivity, profitability, and the survival of companies, and this effect... This is also evident in small businesses. The finding that information barriers They explain a significant part of the low adoption of these practices, which is especially relevant. It indicates that The dissemination of management knowledge can produce significant gains at a relatively low cost. for the sector. With regard to indicators and financial control, the review highlighted the importance of measures. reliable, regularly monitored, and converted into action plans. The data on The survival of companies in Brazil and the inaccuracy of inventory records in retail show Managerial control is not a mere administrative formality. It is a prerequisite for decision-making.

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based on purchases, prices and investments and, ultimately, for the company itself.
business continuity.
Standardization of processes and discipline in execution have proven to be sources of performance.
accessible to small supermarkets, as they require more method and team involvement than
capital. The evidence that compliance with processes protects performance against the effects of
Employee turnover is particularly relevant in an industry where staff turnover is frequent.
Documented procedures also reduce dependence on specific individuals and create
Conditions for growth without loss of quality.
The focus on people and leadership demonstrated that human capital and organizational routines...
These are strategic resources that are difficult to imitate, and their management is directly linked to the choices made.
operational aspects of the company. The training of middle managers, the clear definition of responsibilities.
And the retention of qualified professionals broadens the reach of best practices. With this, the
The owner ceases to be the sole possessor of knowledge about the business, and the company gains...
resilience.

Cooperation in networks and associations has emerged as a means of obtaining some of the economies of scale.
large networks and, above all, to accelerate management learning among companies. This cooperation,
However, it enhances internal management without replacing it, so the best results tend to be achieved.
arising from the combination of well-managed companies and collective support structures. The model
The conceptual framework presented synthesizes this complementary relationship between the internal dimensions and the associative environment.

One limitation is that the narrative review does not exhaust the literature and is based on evidence.
The materials used come from industrial sectors or from other countries, whose conditions differ from those found here.
in Brazilian retail. For future research, the application of instruments of
measuring management practices in small and medium-sized national supermarkets, as well as
longitudinal studies that link the adoption of these practices to survival and profitability,
allowing for empirical testing of the conceptual model proposed in this article.

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