

MARTOR



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Supermarket

Răzvan Marin, marketing agent, 29 years old
Interview done by Dan Bărbulescu

In September 1996, when I got the job here, Metro was the first supermarket in Romania. Until then there had been only ... the Mega Image in Lizeanu Street. It had opened a year before. It was awfully crowded there too, people were crammed up inside because it was something new ... Still, there wasn't much difference between a supermarket and a regular grocery store. But Metro was something completely new.

Their marketing strategy targeted only companies, and entrance was allowed only to those who had cards. They hired young people during the summer. The store opened in November 1996, and I was hired in September. It was during the elections campaign. They said they would only hire students. They had begun to issue cards in June but they worked with people who were not students and those people couldn't care less about the job. They would just carry their bag to work and then spent the day doing nothing because their duties were not very clear: each had to make ten cards a day or something of the kind ...

And there was another trick, namely that you could issue cards to peasants, agriculturists, and you could make up names for people who didn't exist. The norm was of 10-15 cards per day. And you went to see people and not all of them agreed to get a card because they would say, "What need do I have of your supermarket, sir?"

They simply had no idea about it, that's what was going on actually. They only had a presentation booklet. "Leave me alone, sir, I have no need for that, I have my own supplier ..." And you had to ask for a fiscal code, and you can picture their reaction to that, "I won't tell you anything, sir, leave me alone". Some of them had come from abroad and they had heard of Metro, "Oh, man, we'll have one here too!" A couple of us, like me, for instance, had to cover nasty areas, such as Ferentari or other God-forsaken places. I would carry a small briefcase made of plastic and a stick, because there were so many dogs there, and I would walk in awfully muddy streets all over Bucharest. Some of my colleagues, as they couldn't find clients, used to invent names. They said, "I have this many clients", and then filled in those forms with fake names. They wrote down names, such as Vasiliță Ionela from Ciorogârla, which were obviously fake but there was no way anybody could check on them.

We had our strategies. We would tell them that it was the first supermarket in Romania, that it was such an honour for them, that you had to be somebody to get in, that it was a big German consortium with 500 supermarkets worldwide and stuff like that. You would say, "Sir, you'll find anything you want there, from food, cosmetic products and electric drills to fur-

niture”, or something like that. You told them that they would find anything they needed there. Then there was nothing except for markets and small corner shops. There were several thousand such small corner shops all over Bucharest. You climbed down the stairs of your block of flats and you found yourself in front of such a shop.

The supermarket opened in mid October and there was a huge crowd, loads of people gathered there for the occasion ... We were supposed to finish our job after the official opening. We were officially called marketing agents. It was rubbish ‘cause all we had to do was to make Metro cards. And they gathered us all, the marketing agents, to help the women from the cash registers to put the products in bags or to sort out problems that appeared, like for instance when the machines wouldn’t read bar codes. You had to hurry up to find out what the problem was, ‘cause everything had to be done quickly in that crowded place. People weren’t supposed to wait in line for hours, you know. That still happened, though. They had to wait a lot at the gates until their cards were checked, and then they waited at the cash register and the supermarket was very far away, across from Otopeni Airport. We were taken there by special buses, and there were certain fixed places were my colleagues and I waited for the buses. We left for work at 5 am.

The salary they gave us there was about 100 dollars and that was a lot back then. It was ok, they also gave us food and we would smuggle lunch tickets. They needed our help with the cash registers until things settled down and the crowd calmed down a little and the cash registers began reading the damn bar codes and all problems were finally solved.

We had made a list of all companies in Bucharest, so that none could escape our knowledge. We kept reconfiguring the city areas ac-

ording to whatever happened to come up. A few months later there was a long line of people waiting outside our gates to get a card. They had found out about the supermarket and they had hurried there. That happened despite the fact that, when I was out in the street, and told people “look here, man, they’re opening a new supermarket”, most answers I would get were negative. But if his neighbour had told the same person, “Check this out, neighbour”, he immediately went down there to see what the thing was all about. And there were a lot of people who would come to the supermarket with somebody else’s card because things were cheaper and the atmosphere was different there. We were more isolated back then. Many people started coming just to get a card so that they could go in too. The limit for a card was of three names, I guess. That was the company politics: only companies could own cards and use them to get in. That’s why they only sell in bulks. This might be the situation in other countries too but I wouldn’t stick my neck for that.

I know that Iliescu or Văcăroiu attended the opening, but I don’t remember very well. Things were pretty crazy at the time, you know. It was something new and they were the first to open such a supermarket. When Carrefour opened theirs in 2001, things went equally crazy. Figures also speak of that craziness. These supermarkets made you feel as if you had been somewhere in the West, they were little consumerist islands, a place where you could do your shopping differently. You go there and pick up whichever products you choose and you can have a good look at them before you do that. It’s not like “Alimentara”.

Translated by Alina Popescu