

**The trade fair as a temporary cluster: a relational platform and  
knowledge filter for firms. First results of an exploratory study.**

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### **Abstract**

The importance that firms today place on trade fairs is testified by their ubiquity and frequency. Firms tend not to pursue commercial objectives alone at fairs, but also to exploit their knowledge-generating and relational potential. Trade fairs today are not solely means to sell products. They are also relational platforms able to filter flows of information and knowledge, behaving like outright temporary clusters. In this article we have emphasised the need for a new approach to the trade fair, whose importance must be evaluated not only in relation to the commercial policies of firms, but also to the opportunities to acquire information and knowledge, developing relational marketing tools. Our case study - the Vinitaly wine fair – although being exploratory, is an illustration of the interpretative model developed in the paper, and it provides interesting empirical evidence on the role and key functions played by fairs today. The analysis was conducted on a sample of firms (leader firms producing high-quality wines of different size), which, even though limited in quantitative terms, provides some insights for explaining the motivations for firms to participate to trade fairs.

### **1. Introduction**

The importance that firms today place on trade fairs – as testified by their ubiquity and frequency (see Table 1) – is indubitably due to the evolution of this powerful means of communication (Maskell et al., 2006).

**Table 1. Number of trade fairs B2B and B2C, expositors, visitors, and exhibition surface in different countries, 2002**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of fairs</i>	<i>Number of fairs</i>	<i>Number of expositors</i>	<i>Number of visitors</i>	<i>Surface (m<sup>2</sup>)</i>
Germany	- International fairs	145	165.859	9.218.276	6.639.204
	- Regional fairs (B2B, B2C)	179	56.381	7.189.495	1.645.844
France	- National/international fairs	174	64.716	7.020.000	2.282.263
	- Regional /multisectoral fairs	70	28.594	6.279.000	1.370.133
Great Britain	Fairs with at least 2000 m <sup>2</sup> of surface (B2B, B2C)	855	- <sup>(1)</sup>	10.300.000	3.400.000
Spain	Fairs (B2B, B2C)	419	64.664	15.380.000	3.950.000
Italy	International fairs (B2B, B2C)	157	93.199	7.230.000	3.750.000
Hungary	Fairs of associates	- <sup>(1)</sup>	16.500	1.500.000	350.000
IUEF members <sup>(2)</sup>	Fairs of associates	1.154	129.509	- <sup>(1)</sup>	1.695.585
US	The 200 most important fairs	200	194.686	4.200.000	6.000.000

Source: Kresse 2003, AUMA 2003, 2004.

Note: <sup>(1)</sup> non available data; <sup>(2)</sup> IUEF = International Union of Fairs and Exhibitions of Russia, including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldavia, Russia and Ukraine

Whilst in the 1950s the first of these events were nothing more than generic sample shows, whose role was simply to promote national products to a non-defined public, today trade fairs perform a specific communicative function addressed to specialized (business or consumer) target audiences, and they are markedly international in their scale (Golfetto, 2004).

In recent years, the rapid and worldwide development of trade-fair systems has confirmed their utility. However, the ways in which businesses use trade fairs have changed over time (Golfetto, 2000), given that firms tend not to pursue commercial objectives alone at fairs, but also to exploit their knowledge-generating and relational potential (Sharland and Balogh, 1996). Firms no longer use fairs solely to commercialize their products. As Rosson and Seringhaus (1995: 87) well put it: “Neither the “selling” nor the “promotion” conception accurately describes TF (Trade Fairs) activities”. In the contemporary economy, where the division of labour predominates, the creation of relations among firms and exchanges of knowledge have become essential strategies for businesses to gain competitive advantage (Argote & Ingram 2000; Breschi & Lissoni 2001; Chesbrough 2003; Song, Almeida, & Wu 2003). Because of the trade fair’s capacity to concentrate diverse economic activities in a single space, it enables a system of relations to emerge, and consequently gives access to information – both technological and concerning the market – of great strategic importance (Dahl & Pedersen, 2004). For these reasons, trade fairs today are not solely means to sell products; they have become relational platforms able to filter flows of information and knowledge, and they behave like outright temporary clusters. It is this last innovative conception of the fair system (Bathelt et al., 2004) that prompted the research reported here, which used the case study method to analyse participation by firms at a fair event. The intention was to test the validity of the conceptual model proposed as the basis for interpretation of the trade fair’s functions. The case analysed was an international, mainly business-to-business, trade fair: Vinitaly – the International Salon of Wines and Spirits, the undisputed leader in its reference market. The research investigated the motivations that induce firms to attend Vinitaly, their goals, and the modes of encounter among the various actors attending the fair. It was thus possible to verify the importance of this instrument for firms, and its role in improving their performances, in relation not only to the commercial sphere but to the cognitive/relational one as well.

## **2. The fair as a temporary cluster**

Rosson and Seringhaus (1995) defined trade fairs as networks of enterprises, intermediate structures between the hierarchy and the market (Williamson, 1991) made explicit by cooperation and/or sales contracts. The fair-network comprises a wide range of relations (commercial, productive, and of research) which involve both the horizontal dimension (associations, partners, institutions) and the vertical one (customers, suppliers) of the value chain. Participation at fairs extends a firm’s relational network beyond the geographical boundaries defined by the location of its production units, so that the network acts as a prime vehicle for the transfer of knowledge, on the one hand, and for the enlargement of the firm’s market on the other.

Other studies, on which we draw to develop our argument here, have described the trade fair as a temporary cluster (Bathelt et al. 2004; Bathelt and Schuldt, 2005), where by ‘cluster’ is meant a concentration of firms tightly interconnected by commercial and other relations; or to use Porter’s definition (1998: 199): “A cluster is a geographically proximate group of interconnected companies and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities”.

A trade fair embeds the activities of a large number of firms – increasingly specialized and therefore potentially isolated and (geographically) distant from other producers and from users – in a network where other firms are the components of a complex system of productive and technological, market-related and relational knowledge. A fair therefore

has certain features typical of the industrial cluster (Bathelt et al. 2004) and exhibiting the phenomena described in Sections 2.1-2.3. Vertical and horizontal synergies are in place during a trade fair, and those relationships are very closed to the one which characterize an industrial cluster and its learning modalities (Maskell, 2001)

## **2.1. Vertical and horizontal synergies**

Trade-fair organizations have progressively internalized the role of fairs as ‘markets of relations’, offering each participant – exhibitor or visitor – an opportunity both to relate with already-known actors and to increase the number of their connections by establishing relationships with new partners. Moreover, in order to remedy the inefficiency of anonymous and random contacts, fair organizers have introduced various on-line services, notably ‘virtual events’ whereby visitors can obtain prior information about the producers present at the fair and plan meetings, presentations, discussions on specific problems, and so on. Exhibitors, too, often express a similar desire to plan meetings with sub-suppliers and distributors. The events scheduled may be based only on invitations and predetermined meetings: this is the case, for example, of the ‘reverse fairs’ in which the exhibitors – before the event begins – contact visitors (Golfetto, 2004). This type is used in the case of specialized fairs at which firms seek new partners to introduce their products in new geographical areas. Fair organizers are therefore progressively re-shaping their initiatives in response to the needs of exhibitors by organizing round tables, conferences, debates, seminars, and ‘get-togethers’ after closure of the stands in the evening (dinners, visits to museums/exhibitions, etc.). The trend is therefore towards the activation of a relational marketing approach which, edition after edition, increases the amount and intensity of relations between participants and visitors.<sup>i</sup>

### **2.1.1. Vertical synergies with customers**

Interaction with customers is usually the main motive for participation at fairs by firms. The aim is to contact new customers and to intensify relationships with already-existing ones. Firms often contact their various customers before the fair begins. These initial contacts are normally not personalized but are instead standardized (with invitations prepared by the fair organizers). The firm must guarantee the presence of specialized personnel both for generic meetings (where information is given about products, prices, conditions of supply, etc.) and specific ones (when the customer needs highly detailed information to solve particular technical problems).

The exhibitors profit from contacts with both potential customers and already-existing ones (individual customers, bulk buyers, distributors, etc.), because they are simultaneously able to:

1. promote their products;
2. find out about market trends, and at times update their technological knowledge;
3. activate a one-to-one marketing tool which utilizes both the opportunities furnished by new technologies and traditional face-to-face interaction;
4. expand their business area by discussing, and possibly stipulating, new supply contracts.

Every interaction enables the exhibitor to accumulate knowledge about the customer’s needs and to identify new market trends rapidly. The two parties often remain in contact for several years, establishing a trust relationship which enables the exchange of increasingly detailed information. Obtaining information about the experiences of

customers is of crucial importance if the firm is to improve its product and business strategy. Exhibitors may also acquire information about potential new customers by interacting with other customers or partners. We shall call this process ‘interaction through third parties’. The large quantity of information, opinions, or even gossip circulating at the fair on the one hand affords rapid access to knowledge about customers’ needs and market trends, and on the other ensures the continuing vitality of contacts with partners (Maskell et al., 2006).

Contacts and meetings with customers take place at the firm’s stand. In exceptional cases, if the fair is located not far from the firm’s headquarters, the firm may also decide to organize a tour of its premises so that the customer can see how production takes place. Very often, however, exhibitors like to meet their customers in informal settings, in order to benefit from a more relaxed atmosphere which accelerates formation of a trust relationship. For this purpose, the firm may organize evening entertainment for its customers (Nomisma, 1988). The usual meeting places for these informal knowledge exchanges are coffee bars, restaurants, pubs, and so on.<sup>ii</sup> Obviously not all encounters are organized at the fair. Spatial proximity among the actors multiplies the occasions to meet, and it gives rise to a series of contacts both planned and spontaneous. The fair thus becomes a catalyst of information and knowledge which flow through both formal and informal channels.

### **2.1.2. Vertical synergies with suppliers**

Firms also participate at fairs so that they can make direct contact with suppliers (usual and potential). Interactions with actors upstream of the value chain produce a form of communication oriented to:

- (a) seeking solutions for technical problems;
- (b) understanding market developments and future prospects;
- (c) absorbing technological changes;
- (d) grasping the opportunities deriving from identification of new segments of demand.

In this case too, as in the one above-discussed of relationships with customers, meetings can be organized both during the hours of the meetings and in the form of *ad hoc* events, and thus become more spontaneous.

### **2.1.3. Horizontal synergies**

Participation in fairs is also important to establish or intensify relationships with actors along the horizontal dimension (competitors and firms operating in complementary sectors). Addressed to competing firms are initiatives supplying non-contestable ‘public goods’ (information about technologies, regulatory aspects, market trends, and promotional initiatives provided by trade associations). Information about technologies plays a leading role in the case of fairs specialized in industrial machinery; whilst in the case of fairs for the promotion of consumption goods, the central roles are performed by presentations of new products, and by analysis of fashion trends and emerging lifestyles. Participation at these fairs is obligatory for the most important exhibitors, and it enables numerous small firms to keep abreast of market developments. Edition after edition, these meetings support the construction of ‘fiduciary relations’, and they increase the transparency and diffusion of reputation signals among firms. This allows for the sharing of experiences, languages and collective codes of behaviour. Much more

direct economic effects can also be identified, such as the creation of joint ventures between firms, and the start-up of specialization paths?.

A fair furnishes the exhibiting firms with a direct and rapid overview of their markets and the competitive environment. Firms acquire such information in three main ways (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2005).

1. through direct contacts. Direct contact with competitors usually occurs during the fair's official opening hours, when the firm's representatives visit the stands of its competitors. Of course, not all firms, those of small size especially, are able to devote specific personnel to monitoring operations. These encounters give rise to a large amount of information dispersion (leakage), because the danger of revealing strategic information is often not perceived.

2. through third parties. Information about the actions and strategies of competitors are often revealed by the firm's customers. Such information helps analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of competitors, so that the firm can fine-tune its competitive strategies.

3. through observation and comparison (observational learning and monitoring). This is perhaps the most efficacious way to obtain information about competitors, namely by directly observing the products exhibited on the fair stands. This modality of obtaining information makes the temporary cluster very similar to a permanent one, in that it allows maximum 'permeability' in the diffusion of innovations, information, and technical knowledge. This enables firms to perform accurate benchmarking with the other operators present.

## **2.2. 'Local buzz' (spontaneous knowledge exchanges and interactions)**

The physical presence of numerous exhibitors/offerers and visitors/buyers fosters the wide-ranging exchange of information and knowledge. This happens both explicitly – casual observation of novelties displayed at stands, attendance at information events, conferences, and briefings on new codes and standards organized by the fair – but also (or above all) implicitly. Often the most important part of the value added obtained from participating in fairs consists in the non-deliberate absorption of new knowledge, the renewed capacity to interpret implicit codes of behaviour, and the ability to grasp new trends. During the fair, various actors from different parts of the world, for a limited period, share their experiences and their specialized knowledge. Some scholars – Bathelt et al., 2004; Maskell et al., 2006 – have called these information flows “local buzz”. Storper and Venables (2004) define buzz as an efficient technology of communication typical of settings characterized by high uncertainty: a means to resolve coordination and to correct incentive problems. Buzz is regarded as a key element in the socialization process which gives the actors involved a sense of belonging to a group. It is therefore important for defining the identity of an organization or a professional community. In other words, 'local buzz' in the case of fairs is substantiated in the form of information exchange favoured by spatial proximity and the possibility of face-to-face contacts (F2F). F2F yields notable communicative advantages deriving from the geographical co-location of the interlocutors, who can conduct a conversation which benefits from both visual and physical contact (rather than the virtuality of a telephone or a webcam). In situations where information is imperfect, and rapidly changes so that it is difficult to codify, F2F is a communicative tool of great importance (Storper and Venables, 2004). Buzz can also exist in the absence of F2F contact, given that it may also arise from a complex corpus of unstructured information. As Grabher writes (2002: 209), individuals “*are not deliberately 'scanning' their environment (...), but rather are surrounded by a concoction of rumours, impression, recommendation, trade folklore*”

*and strategic information*”. They absorb information and knowledge also merely by ‘being there’ and able to observe, receive news, information and gossip concerning the other actors involved in the temporary fair-cluster. Of course, only members of the cluster can profit from local buzz, because they belong to a learning community (localised form of learning: Maskell and Malmberg, 2006) which develops a common language and similar interpretative schemes. Buzz helps to identify and to select the firms that are deemed most interesting. It therefore allows information to be acquired about those firms and the rapid establishment of contacts. It consequently helps reduce the uncertainty inherent in both local relationships and extra-local ones; it reduces information asymmetries; it facilitates the building of trust among economic partners; it promotes cooperation; and it facilitates interpretation of market trends. It constitutes, in fact, a social mechanism to minimize transaction costs.

### **2.3. ‘Global pipelines’<sup>iii</sup> (voluntarily constructed international channels for information and the exchange or production of knowledge)**

Fairs enable small and medium-sized enterprises – which only with difficulty can operate in foreign markets– to create contacts with distant partners through trans-local relationships or ‘global pipelines’. Especially at international events, the first steps can be taken towards developing (more or less) permanent pipelines relative to research, production, and/or marketing with partners operating in diverse markets. In this way, flows of external knowledge internally enhance firms’ innovative capacities and their business competitiveness. Relatively to permanent clusters, temporary spatial ones foster the creation of trans-local pipelines without (or with low) additional costs: for firms do not have to undertake *ad hoc* investments in order to establish new contacts (i.e. they do not have to make investments additional to the costs of participating in the fair). Spatial proximity not only facilitates interaction, it also reduces the risk of forming ‘undesirable’ relations’. In short, ‘global pipelines’ and ‘local buzz’ are two closely connected phenomena which facilitate processes of inter-organizational learning, knowledge conversion, and enabling<sup>iv</sup> (Nonaka et al., 2006). Information acquired by each actor about, for instance, opportunities in new markets and/or new technological opportunities is then made to circulate collectively within the local network of the temporary cluster, fostering and multiplying the buzz-effect. ‘Local buzz’ in its turn enables firms to filter information originating at a distance, so that they can improve their selection of important and innovative information and discard that of little use. An actor that participates in a temporary cluster is in fact absorbed into an atmosphere of ideas and knowledge (analogous to the Marshallian ‘industrial atmosphere’) which fosters, often in unintended ways, the communication of news and the generation of new products.

As will have been noted, the cluster approach to fairs is distinguished from the network conception mainly by the co-presence of a formal network of collaborations/sales and an informal network of knowledge transferred through unstructured meetings that give rise to the ‘local buzz’. The conception of the fair as a temporary cluster provides a good theoretical basis for understanding the relational dynamics of knowledge creation and diffusion.

### **3. A new conceptual model**

Three key functions of the fair in its contemporary form can be identified: 1. ‘selling’; 2. ‘relation’; and 3. ‘knowledge’.

The typical function of selling is therefore flanked by those of relational platform and knowledge exchange via synergies, which come about in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the value chain. Knowledge transfer processes are on the one hand formal and closely connected with formal transactions, whilst on the other they are informal and assisted by the local buzz. The internationalization of fairs makes it possible for firms to build 'global pipelines': long channels facilitating knowledge transfer among spatially distant actors. As explained in the previous section, these features make the fair an interesting case for the application of a new theoretical construct: the temporary cluster. The motives for attending a fair can therefore be inserted into an interpretative framework that arranges them along the three above-mentioned key functions numbered from 1 to 3. We shall now briefly discuss these three motivations.

1a. *Selling*. A fair can be considered a prime distributive channel whereby large volumes of business are performed, according to a model of commercial polarization (Pilotti and Zanderighi, 2003).

1b. *Communicating the corporate image*. Fairs perform a specific role in the mix of corporate communication.<sup>v</sup> Whilst advertising in the media or trade magazines is essential in the first stage of the purchasing process (emergence and satisfaction of a need) and in the last one (purchasing and assistance channels), a trade fair is the most suitable means in the intermediate stage (search for and evaluation of products and suppliers) – a delicate phase which although costly is necessary to make carefully-considered strategic decisions. The features that make the fair unique from the point of view of promoting the corporate images are: (a) neutrality; (b) interactivity; (c) physicality. Firstly, a context (a) made entirely neutral by the co-presence of suppliers and competitors allows comparison to be made among the entire range of products on offer, optimizing choices with an enormous saving of time and a large reduction in information retrieval costs. Secondly, the visitor actively interacts with the exhibitor (b), coming into contact not only with the products on offer but also with the competences of every possible supplier. For its part, the exhibitor will gain the advantage of not having to seek out customers. In a system where the roles are reversed, it is the potential buyers that seek out their suppliers: a self-selected target more motivated to listen than would be the case in other circumstances. A fundamental aspect (c) is obviously the spatial proximity typical of fairs which facilitates both contacts and corporate communication.

1c. *Launching new and/or innovative products*. An important factor in the attractiveness of a fair stand is the presence of innovative, or at any rate new, products. It is therefore evident that exhibitors fully exploit the opportunities provided by the fair to launch their new products.

1d. *Penetrating new markets*. Entry into new markets may be facilitated by signals from the firm's stand of the quality of its products and/or services, as well as by participation in specific 'exhibition awards' (Orth and Krška, 2002). Moreover, opportunities to contact new, geographically distant customers benefit small and medium-sized firms, which would otherwise be unable to afford the costs of accessing new markets.

2a. *Constructing and strengthening relations with customers and potential/existing suppliers*. Meeting customers and suppliers in an environment favourable to communication like a fair produces opportunities to consolidate already-existing relationships and to create new ones, producing cognitive maps of the value chain.

3a. *Developing new products*. Owing to the large number of participants (whether exhibitors or visitors), a fair is a useful means with which to produce new ideas or new products, to screen existing products and technologies, and to test the attractiveness of

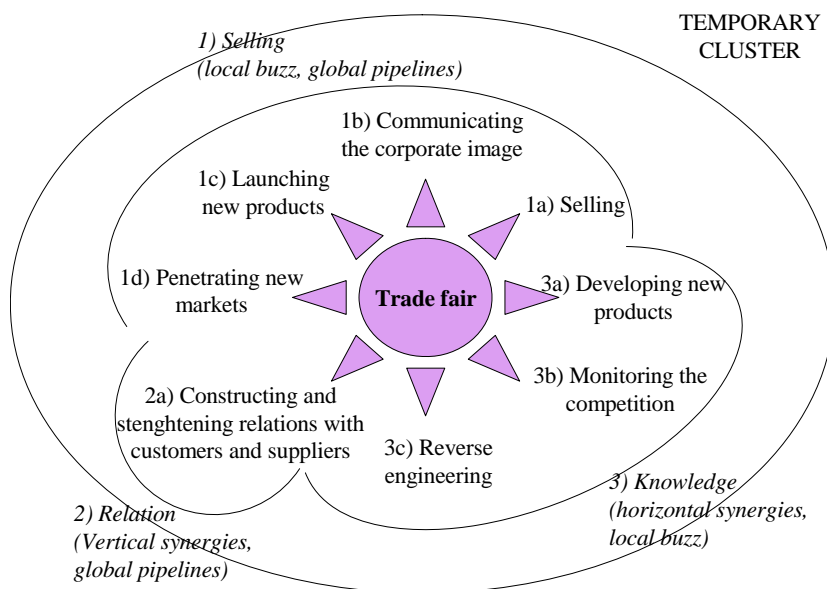


an innovative product (Bello and Barczak, 1990). Moreover, the fact that the various actors all belong to the same work environment induces them to interact and develop partnerships for the ideation of new products. By triggering learning-by-interaction processes (Lundvall, 1985), these partnerships are potential sources of innovation.

3b. *Monitoring the competition.* The opportunity to monitor competitors is one of the main advantages deriving to firms from participation at a trade fair. During the brief duration of the fair, in fact, a firm can acquire a great deal of ‘low-cost’ information about its competitive arena by conducting effective and rapid benchmarking analyses (Sharland and Balogh, 1996).

3c. *Reverse engineering.* This is the process by which a firm or a design office purchases a product of the competition (a device, an electric component, a software program, etc.) and analyses it in detail, usually with the intention of producing a new device or an improved program. A fair, with its vast array of products on display, is an excellent place to undertake reverse engineering.

**Figure 1. Interpretative model of various functions played by the fair**



The interpretative model presented in Figure 1 is intended to be a useful tool for analysis of the benefits that may derive from participation in a fair, conceived as a temporary cluster.

In Figure 1, the objectives which the enterprise intends to achieve by participating at a fair have been arranged according to the three key functions identified above (‘selling’, ‘relation’, ‘knowledge’). Indicated in brackets for each of the functions are the mechanisms that favour achievement of the objectives. As will be seen, local buzz is important for the selling and knowledge functions, global pipelines are strategically important for the selling and relation functions, vertical and horizontal synergies facilitate the relation and knowledge functions.<sup>vi</sup> It is evident that the system as a whole is a form of temporary cluster.

#### **4. The Vinitaly case**

##### **4.1. The development of an international fair-system endowed with advanced competences**

First organized in 1967, and held every year for five days (7-11 April), Vinitaly today enjoys an outstanding reputation, both because of participation by prestigious wine producers and because of large attendance by specialist operators. The fair in Verona has undergone a long process of evolution. It is located in an agricultural area where already in the 1700s numerous experiments were being conducted to improve the quality of the local wine. Initially, the event, organized by Veronafiere and held at the Palazzo del Gran Guardia, was essentially a convention entitled 'Italian Wine Days' and centred on the most salient business issues of the day. It lasted for two days (22 and 23 September). Only in 1971 did the event's original didactic function give way to promotional-marketing ones. This change was also evidenced by the change of name: henceforth the event was called 'Vinitaly – Salon of Wine Activities'. Since 1987, the wine salon has been flanked by others for olive oil, vine- and olive-growing equipment, and distilled spirits – which in 1995 was absorbed by the parent event, which thus took its present name: Vinitaly – International Salon of Wine and Spirits. There then began an evolutionary process whereby the fair was first an event for local and national wine producers, and then a pole of attraction for foreign exhibitors as well. Since the 1990s, in fact, the Vinitaly organizers have increased their efforts to internationalize the event, opening its doors to the new wine-producing countries and experimenting with new ways to present wine, and therefore to organize trade fairs. The aim of giving greater space to foreign exhibitors has given rise to targeted initiatives to promote Italian wine in foreign countries and, vice versa, to award prizes and thereby identify niches of oenological excellence worldwide. A leading player in this internationalization has been the trade visitor (HoReCa - Hotel, Restaurant, Catering), likewise incentivated by a series of awards certifying the quality of service delivery. Participation at Vinitaly is now essential for firms wishing to gain international recognition. This is shown by the figures relative to the edition of 2005, when there were around 4210 exhibitors and 143,020 visitors, in large part foreigners. Moreover, since 1998, the policy of Veronafiere has been to assist Italian firms in their expansion, promotion and internationalization, enabling them to gain direct access to foreign markets. The results of this policy are Vinitaly China, Vinitaly – U.S. Tour, Vinitaly India and Vinitaly Russia, initiatives to enhance knowledge and appreciation of Italy's best wine and food products.<sup>vii</sup>

The "Vinitaly International Prize" has been created by Veronafiere as an award to Italian and foreign firms achieving excellence in wine production worldwide. Large space is also allocated to trade operators. An example is the 'Best Wine List' international competition run jointly with ARDI (*Associazione Internazionale dei Ristoranti d'Italia*) and which awards prizes to quality Italian restaurants abroad which best promote Italian wines. The internationalization of the Verona fair has made a further decisive advance with the *Vinitaly Tour* which comprises important stages in countries like China and USA (since 2006 it has also included India and Russia).<sup>viii</sup> The internationalization strategy pursued by Veronafiere addressed to large-scale international importers has been accompanied by a careful choice of markets, which now consist of not only business customers but also discerning final consumers: wine buffs and wine tourists, etc. (i.e. collectors, connoisseurs, and lovers of quality wine in general). This is a strategy analogous to that of the Bordeaux fair in France, but it goes

further by differentiating the ‘places’ dedicated to the event in the city (fair zone and urban centre). Participation in this initiative is encouraged by a price policy which fixes the cost of admission much lower than that charged to visitors of the fair.

**Table 2. Evolution of Vinitaly**

<b><i>LENGHT OF MARKETS INVOLVED</i></b>	<b><i>TYOLOGY OF EXPOSITORS</i></b>
<i>LOCAL MARKET</i> Since 1967	<i>LOCAL SUPPLY</i> - Prevailing local expositors - Local visitors
<i>NATIONAL MARKET</i> Since 1971	<i>NAZIONAL SUPPLY</i> (export oriented) - Prevailing national expositors - Many foreign external visitors
<i>INTERNATIONAL MARKET</i> Since 1980	<i>INTERNAZIONAL EXCHANGES</i> (international hub) - Prevailing international expositors and visitors
<i>SPECIFIC FOREIGN MARKET</i> Since 1998	<i>FAIRS FOCUSED ON SOME SPECIFIC DEMAND ON FOREIGN MARKETS</i> - Large shares of foreign expositors - Local-national visitors

Source: our elaboration on Golfetto (2004).

## **4.2. The results of the field research**

### **4.2.1. Characteristics of firms**

The sample surveyed consisted of 10 medium-sized and small wine-making firms<sup>ix</sup> that had participated in Vinitaly 2005 and were located in Veneto, the leading Italian wine-producing region (in 2004, 9 million hectolitres were produced out of a total production of 53 million: source Assoenologi). These firms have a certain prestige in the market and are located in the three provinces of Verona, Padua and Treviso.<sup>x</sup> All the businesses examined had been operating in the wine sector for more than fifty years, and in the majority of cases had evolved over time from simple physical persons into corporate bodies. Average employment was around thirty labour units. In 2005 these firms had an average sales volume of 4,504,000 euros (of which 61% consisted of exports). The majority of sales were made in non-European markets: United States, Canada, Scandinavian countries, India, China, Russia, Asia, Thailand, Korea, Hungary, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Japan and Greece. The principal outlet market within the European Union was Germany. In 2005, these firms allocated 1.5% of their budgets to fair activities, an amount which consisted of around 50% of their total investments in marketing and communication. The largest firm did not have its own vineyards (it was a cooperative to which growers sent their grapes for processing); 6 firms worked only with grapes grown on their land; and in 3 cases the pattern was mixed.

The sample comprised firms which had regularly participated in Vinitaly, and on average for about 28 years. Participation in trade fairs besides Vinitaly during 2005 by the firms interviewed was extraordinarily high: 5 local events (only one enterprise), 3 regional ones (2 firms), 8 national ones (4 firms), and 31 international ones (all the cases investigated). On average, during 2005, our sample had participated in 4-5 trade fairs, rising to 5-6 if the Verona fair is included.

#### 4.2.2. Reasons for participation

All the firms interviewed stated that participation in Vinitaly was the key to accessing different markets and one of the best channels for promotion and diffusion of their brands; but an equally high value was assigned to the relational dimension (Table 2). The aim of participation was to achieve greater visibility and to improve the firm's image, sometimes also certified by awards bestowed by Veronafiere (Orth and Krška, 2002). But the intention was also to intensify relations with customers, to meet new partners (often large importers), acquire new knowledge about markets, and to obtain indirect or direct information about competitors.

Interaction with suppliers (perhaps in order to acquire new technological knowledge) was not given a high score by the respondents. In fact, the existence of a fair specifically devoted to wine technologies differentiated this aspect from others. Hence, “*interaction with the supplier*”, an interviewee declared, “*consists in no more than a simple greeting ... perhaps you offer him a glass of wine ... nothing more*”.

**Table 3. Importance of the reasons for participation to Vinitaly (evaluation scale 1-10)**

	<i>Reasons for participating to Vinitaly</i>	<i>Average score</i>
<i>1) Selling</i>	To contact new clients	8,3
	To get access to new markets	7,8
	To stress the firm image	7,8
	To effect new transactions	6,5
	<i>Average score of the selling function</i>	<i>7,74</i>
<i>2) Relation</i>	To meet existent clients for establishing a more close relationship	9,5
	To contact new machinery suppliers	2,5
	To meet the existing machinery suppliers	2,2
	<i>Average score of the relation function</i>	<i>4,7</i>
<i>3) Knowledge</i>	To Confront with competitors	5,4
	To acquire more expertise in the product quality	4,4
	To obtain new solutions to specific technical problems	2,1
	To access to new knowledge related to chemical technologies	2,1
	To find new personnel	0,8
	<i>Average score of the knowledge function</i>	<i>2,96</i>
	<i>Frequency of participation to Vinitaly (years)</i>	<i>27,5</i>

Source: Interviews

#### 4.2.2. The utility of Vinitaly

The second part of the interview sought to determine the actual utility – apart from the objectives of marketing, image-building and public recognition – that the firms interviewed assigned to Vinitaly, which constitutes the core of a wide range of promotional activities. The greatest impact of participation in the fair seems to concern improvement in relations with established customers, an increase in potential customers, and more contacts with importers (Table 4). In fact, it is not always possible for firms exhibiting at the fair to meet the final customer directly, given the impossibility for the latter to attend (for reasons of cost, time, work, etc.). Hence the firm contacted customers through the importers, which acted as intermediaries and informed the firm

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about needs, tastes, and the market situation. All the respondents stated that Vinitaly enabled them not only to acquire greater knowledge about market opportunities but also to establish new relationships with foreign distribution networks (global pipelines).

**Table 4. Utility assigned to factors judged important for participation to the fair (evaluation scale 1-10)**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Average score</b>
To improve relations with existing clients	8,8
To increase the number of potential clients	8,4
To make relations with firms upstream (vine producers) and down-stream (importers)	6,4
To confront with competitors	5,6
To improve relations with machinery suppliers	1,4
To increase the number of suppliers	1,3

Source: Interviews

Table 5 lists the various markets reached. A composite picture emerges where access to the American market and the new niche markets of Asia and Eastern Europe seems to predominate.

**Table 5. New markets covered tanks to the participation to the fairs**

<b>Countries in which has been activated a new export flow</b>	<b>Number of firms which have reached the new markets</b>
US	6
Canada	1
Grain Britain	1
Japan	2
Chorea	3
Singapore	1
Antilles	1
Thailand	1
Hungary	1
Cecs Republic	2
Greece	1
Kazakhstan	1
Germany	1
Scandinavian	4
Denmark	1
Ukraine	2
Russia	1
<b>Italy</b>	<b>1</b>

Source: Interviews

Participation in Vinitaly also enabled the firms interviewed to significantly increase both contacts with new clients and relations with competitors (Table 6).

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**Table 6. Average increase in the number of contacts realised the subsequent year after the participation to the fair**

<b>Percentage of increase in the number of contacts referred to:</b>	
<i>New clients</i>	<i>Competitors</i>
+45,8 %	+23,2 %

Source: Interviews

As regards the reasons for interacting with other actors participating in the fair (Table 7), ‘selling’ (i.e. improved business marketing and product sales) appears to have been complementary to the ‘relation’ function (enhancing or creating new relationships with final customers or importers), and ‘knowledge’ (acquisition of new knowledge about the market and technology).

**Table 7. Importance of the interactions with other fair participants (evaluation scale 1-10)**

<i>Typology of participants</i>	<i>Selling (strengthening of the marketing function)</i>	<i>Acquisition of market knowledge</i>	<i>Acquisition of technical knowledge</i>	<i>Thickening of the relations</i>
Existing clients	6,2	8,2	NR	8,2
Potential clients	10,0	6,2	NR	6,0
Competitors	NA	Alta	Alta	bassa
Existing suppliers	NA	NR	2,7	3,3
Potential suppliers	NA	NR	1,2	1,2

Source: Interviews

Note: NA = not available; NR = not relevant

The smaller firms, however, considered Vinitaly an excellent opportunity to complete negotiations or to discuss technical aspects, above all with foreign importers otherwise difficult to reach. The trade fair, therefore, was less a knowledge-creation tool than one which accelerated knowledge diffusion. The relational aspect combined with the knowledge variable and with selling aims. Acquiring knowledge about markets appears to have been more important than obtaining specific technical knowledge (which our interviewees acquired by attending specialized fairs focused on wine-production technologies).

Large part of the interviewees declared that when circumstances allowed it, they would take a break to observe the novelties on display at Vinitaly. On these occasions, they were extremely curious about the stands of competitor firms, with which they very often had not only competitive but also friendly relations. The frequency of the relations recorded in our sample was high, not only, as seen, in regard to customers but also to competitors (Table 8).

**Table 8. Frequency and modalities of information acquisition on clients, suppliers and competitors of the interviewed firms**

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Modalities</i>								
	Direct contact			Through organization of initiatives			Through others		
	Clients	Suppliers	Competitors	Clients	Suppliers	Competitors	Clients	Suppliers	Competitors
Always	60%	10%	10%	10%	0%	10%	10%	0%	20%
Often	10%	20%	30%	20%	0%	50%	0%	30%	50%
Sometimes	30%	60%	50%	50%	0%	40%	80%	20%	30%
Never	10%	10%	10%	20%	100%	0%	10%	50%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Interviews

Diverse kinds of encounter took place during the fair. As shown by Table 9, formal occasions predominated in the relationship with suppliers, whilst relationships with customers were divided equally between formal and informal. This latter type of meeting fostered the spontaneous atmosphere of knowledge exchange which we have called ‘local buzz’.

**Table 9. Typology of encounters (percentage on the total number of relations built by clients and suppliers)**

<i>Typology of encounters</i>	<i>Clients</i>	<i>Suppliers</i>
Formal encounters	45,5%	100%
Semi-formal encounters	9%	0%
Informal encounters	45,5%	0%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Interviews

## 5. Conclusions

A trade fair can be seen as a useful means for a firm to enhance its activities of selling, relational marketing, and new information and knowledge acquisition. As such it functions as a temporary cluster. It facilitates relations along the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the value chain supported by fiduciary mechanisms and by F2F information exchanges, making the fair the ideal place for the transmission and reception of information to support corporate marketing strategies. Large part of the current literature on relational marketing focuses on the benefits deriving from use of the new ICTs – Information & Communication Technologies – (Grandinetti, 1993; Mandelli, 1997; Castellet, 2003). But the case of the fair disrupts this applicative framework, replacing the modern platforms of virtual communication with the traditional ‘market square’, the physical place of meeting and socialization. Trade fairs create an industrial atmosphere of high relationality, and they are ideal arenas both to establish new contacts and to maintain long-standing relations. The neutrality of the technological means is replaced with the warmth of F2F relations, which because they also take place outside the fair’s opening hours, are ideal vehicles for socialization and the creation of communities of trans-organizational practice.

The social dimension of the fair should be more properly framed in a context of synergic marketing (Castellet, 2004). This evolves out of relational marketing and is

based on the central idea that creating relational and synergic environments among different subjects – which pool and share resources, objectives, and strategies – is an essential strategy with which to counter the challenges raised by the complexity and hyper-competition of current markets, and of the societies which they traverse.

Our research tends to re-value an ancient channel of business promotion (the fair) by highlighting the value added generated by a more conscious and efficacious use of it by firms. The international B2B fair makes it possible to overcome the trade-off between ‘reach’ and ‘richness’, while simultaneously increasing the number of actors reached (high level of ‘reach’) and the quality of information (high level of ‘richness’). Especially in industrial marketing, substitutability between F2F and virtual contacts is very low, despite the new opportunities created by Internet applications, such as electronic auctions and e-marketplaces. These latter impose high levels of language standardization upon firms and costly investments in product and process certifications which SMEs often cannot afford. Instead, the trade fair allows, as already said, effective and above all low-cost information exchange.

The opportunities furnished by trade fairs for business growth can certainly be strengthened, in at least two main ways: 1. by favouring the international presence of Italian industry and participation in fairs abroad; 2. by paying close attention to knowledge-management, and therefore to the organization of training courses and the promotion of research within the trade-fair sector.

The first strategy enhances internationalization processes, commercial and productive, useful to foster the growth of firms in a globalized socio-economic environment. Moreover, by stimulating information exchanges, also with distant partners, it favours innovation through patterns of “*absorptive capacity*” (Coehn and Levinthal, 1990). The second strategy focuses on the impact that fairs may exert on the growth of a firm’s human resources, also by giving access to quality training services and establishing social relationships with the members of other organizations. The notion of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998), as a means for informal and non-hierarchically managed organizational learning, facilitates the accumulation of inter-organizational social capital fostering individual/collective growth paths and the progressive empowerment of human resources. Thus desirable is action by the organizers of fairs to expand ongoing and planned initiatives, in order to create occasions for the encounter and growth of human resources, in regard both to product and process innovation, as well as to the development of further distribution channels and internationalization.

In this article we have emphasised the need for a new approach to the trade fair, whose importance must be evaluated not only in relation to the commercial policies of firms, but also to the opportunities afforded to the latter to acquire information and knowledge and to develop new elements of relational marketing. The increasing spread and frequency of fairs, as well as the advantages deriving from them, cannot easily be replaced by technologies in which communications and the transactions among agents come about virtually and electronically. Spatial proximity generates various positive externalities from the intensification of relationships (both spontaneous and planned) and the diffusion of information and knowledge spillovers. Today, fairs perform a specific communicative function with specialized (business or consumer) target audiences, and they display a high degree of internationalization.

Although the case study presented, that of the Vinality wine fair, is an exploratory analysis of the interpretative model developed in the article, it furnishes interesting empirical evidence on the role and key functions of the fair today, providing important backing for our research hypotheses. The analysis conducted on a sample of firms



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(leader firms producing high-quality wines), even though limited in quantitative terms, provides insights into the motives for, and the main results of, participation by firms in trade fairs, doing so in line with the features of temporary clusters discussed in our analytical model.

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## **INTERNET SITES**

- [www.italystore.com](http://www.italystore.com)
- [www.vinality.com](http://www.vinality.com)
- [www.enolitech.com](http://www.enolitech.com)
- [www.oiv.com](http://www.oiv.com)

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> For this purpose, besides the organization of large events, fairs arrange (also at times different from the main events) numerous smaller-scale meetings. Workshops are the most interesting of these occasions provided so that operators can search for commercial partners. During a workshop it is possible to establish new contacts and to garner ideas for new products. Workshops are often reserved for professionals alone. They are briefer in duration than fairs, usually lasting from one to three days. The venues of workshops are not always the site of the fair, though: indeed, they are most often conference rooms at hotels or in congress centres.

<sup>ii</sup> A study by Bathelt and Schuldt (2005: 13) reports the following comment by an exhibitor at the Light and Building international fair held in Hannover in 2000: *“I met a customer this morning in the bus on my way to the fair. It happens all the time when you walk through the facilities. ... When you leave [your exhibit] to use the toilet, go for a smoke or grab something to eat and the like, you always bump into someone you know. Some would say that such conversations are the best because you are not interrupted by others.”* This testimony shows that the bars, cafés and corridors of the fair are the engine of relationships among participants.

<sup>iii</sup> A ‘pipeline’ is an information channel used in relations with geographically distant partners (Owen-Smith and Powell, 2002 – subsequently published as Owen-Smith, J. and Powell W.W. (2004), “Knowledge Networks as Channels and Conduits: The Effects of Spillovers in the Boston Biotechnology Community”, *Organization Science*, 15(1):5-21).

<sup>iv</sup> ‘Enabling’ here refers to the learning processes that enhance the operational and cognitive capabilities of firms.

<sup>v</sup> A sample-based survey has estimated the costs of fairs as amounting on average to 30% of the promotional and advertising investments of Italian manufacturing firms. The survey calculated that German firms invest around 25%, English ones 25%, French ones 20% and American (USA) ones between 22 and 25% (Golfetto, 2004).

<sup>vi</sup> It should be pointed out that the new knowledge acquisition function is in fact very extensive and connected with access to numerous external sources of innovation, as well as to the presence of learning both by interaction and by cooperation. Nevertheless, in regard to fairs, it seemed important to stress the importance of learning by direct observation of competitors.

<sup>vii</sup> Vinality has become increasingly a showcase for DOC certified local wines, stimulating producers exhibiting at the show to have the true ‘character’ of their wines verified by the best sommeliers in the world. For example in 2005 this strategy was pursued with the ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ initiative promoted with the *Association de la Sommellerie Internationale* (ASI). The purpose of this scheme was not only to increase the segmentation of the top end of the wine market, in relation to the various existing macro and meso-systems (Mastroberardino, 2002), but also to counter what is now called ‘the international standardization of taste’.

<sup>viii</sup> In 2004 Vinality China was a great success for both exhibitors and visitors, with over 150 exhibitors from 16 Italian regions and around 3000 visitors from 15 different countries. Rather different has been the case of the Vinality U.S. tour, which is conceived more as a series of workshops held in various cities than as a real Italian fair. In 2004 the Italian firms participating in the initiative numbered 50, while visitors were around 500 for the two stages of the tour (Miami and San Francisco). In 2005 this travelling trade fair, linked with seminars on Italian wines and on Italian vine-growing, was held first in Boston, then in Chicago, and finally in Los Angeles.

<sup>ix</sup> The rationale that informed the case selection strategy was twofold. On the one hand, we searched for firms with different characteristics (e.g. recent vs. ancient, high-tech vs. low tech, small sized vs. large sized) in order to include extreme situations and polar types in which the process under investigation is “transparently observable” (Eisenhardt, 1989). Accordingly to qualitative research methods, this selection strategy relies on theoretical sampling rather than random selection since the cases are chosen for theoretical, not statistical, reasons (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

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<sup>x</sup> The firms interviewed were: Maculan, Adami, Ca Lustra, Allegroni, Cantina Sociale della Valpolicella, Aldegheri, Fratelli Tedeschi, accordino, Tommasi, and Inama. The interviews were conducted by M. Omizzolo.