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Using Anthropological Methods to Study
Industrial Marketing and Purchasing: An
Exploration of Professional Trade Shows



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Abstract

In this paper, we follow the suggestion of Cova and Salle (2003) to apply “a bulk of rejuvenated methodologies” to research industrial marketing and purchasing. By adopting anthropological methods we intend to contribute to the literature regarding trade shows and the pre-purchase information search of industrial buyers. Our findings unfold new knowledge and a deeper understanding of visitor behavior at trade shows and of the informative value of these events. Discussions of data collected in the field of five events in the fashion industry provide insights to exhibitors as well as new directions for future research.

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Using anthropological methods to study industrial marketing and purchasing: An exploration of professional trade shows

1 Introduction

A long-established assumption in the industrial marketing research community is that business markets are rather different from consumer markets, and that, correspondingly, the prevailing view in business-to-consumer marketing literature is not much helpful in explaining the complex dynamics observed in business-to-business contexts. In a recent presentation at the Industrial Marketing & Purchasing Conference, however, Cova and Salle (2003) proposed an overview of recent developments in BtoC marketing, which is no longer dominated by a positivist paradigm, and where postmodern researchers have started "to investigate very diverse topics through a bulk of rejuvenated methodologies", changing radically the ways consumers, markets, and marketing strategies are represented in top-ranking journals and, increasingly, text-books. In their presentation, the two scholars urged BtoB marketing scholars to get inspired by these exciting developments since these new methods and perspectives may also be useful to our research.

In this paper, we intend to follow this suggestion and adopt anthropological methods in order to contribute to the literature regarding professional trade shows and the pre-purchase information search of industrial buyers. Professional trade shows are "events that bring together, in a single location, a group of suppliers who set up physical exhibits of their products and services from a given industry" (Black 1986). In European B2B markets, trade shows absorb up to 40-70% of industrial businesses' overall promotional budgets (CERMES 2001): the issue of how to maximize the returns of such huge investments is hence considered highly relevant by practitioners. Although many contributions now exist on trade show effectiveness, empirical results are far from providing exhibitors with proper guidance on the issue: in a recent review, Blythe (2002) concluded that "the question of trade fair effectiveness remains largely unanswered", and "research so far seems to show that most exhibitors are not making the most of the opportunity".

In this paper, we argue that a better comprehension of *visitor behavior* is key in improving exhibitor performance. Industrial buyers visiting trade shows are in search of information about new solutions, new products, new suppliers (Golfetto 1997; Gopalakrishna and Lilien 1995). In their search of information, they face, however, constraints in terms of physical fatigue, attention span, and time. The latter is a particularly relevant limit, because it is linked to the cost-opportunity of being absent from workplace (Golfetto 2004). In spite of such limits, at trade shows buyers have to compare a huge number of alternatives, by physical entering booths, speaking with exhibitor personnel, analyzing products. For example, in 2003 LIGNA, the leading European trade show for the forestry and wood industries, held biennially in Hanover, hosted 1,720 exhibitors: it is evident that none of the over 100,000 professional visitors could visit them all in the five days the event lasted. This situation is common: most international trade shows attract from several hundreds to several thousands exhibitors (CERMES 2004), and consequently visitors have to face a rather complex *selection process* of the alternatives to deepen. This means that most exhibitors will never be visited and, in spite of their investments, will never have the possibility to contact potential buyers.

In spite of its relevance for trade show performance, the issue of visitor behavior has so far been neglected by the empirical literature: the bulk of research on trade shows has in fact focused on exhibitors (Munuera and Ruiz 1999). Although some research on trade show visitors exists (e.g. Bello 1992; Bello and Lothia 1993; Dudley 1990; Morris 1988; Munuera and Ruiz 1999; Rothschild 1987), the empirical methods adopted rely on quantitative methods that hardly permit to capture the complex and nuanced nature of visitor behavior. The process through which visitors select exhibitors, although cognitive in nature, manifests itself in concrete terms: in acts, gestures, dialogs and discourses, and more general in behaviors that can be deeply understood by researchers only through a participant observation and the request of explanations in the place. By permitting to do so, anthropological methods (which are increasingly becoming mainstream in consumer behavior research) may both contribute to our understanding of the industrial purchase process and, at the same time, provide insights useful to practitioners.

The spirit of this paper and its methodological approach are postmodern in nature (e.g. Lyotard 1984; Brown 1997), where “postmodern” indicates an approach alternative to a positivistic view of science, in general, and of marketing, specifically (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Sherry 1998; Podestà and Addis 2005). By espousing the idea of a need of pluralism of perspectives and methods (Hudson and Ozanne 1988), we think that our contribution is a further step toward the direction indicated by Cova and Salle (2003, 2008).

2 The Anthropological Approach

The anthropological perspective, which is essentially multidisciplinary, allows a holistic understanding of the interplay of nature and culture (Harris 1971). Diachronic, and comparative in nature, such a perspective seeks to keep a critical view on society, a view built on the comparison among different cultures and, pre-eminently, on the examination of otherwise unquestioned assumptions (Sherry 1995). The anthropological approach helps to understand and legitimate the existence of different and synchronic interpretations of the same phenomenon; at the same time, it promises an amplified understanding of the determinants of the variety of interpretations. While quantitative research is generally concerned with the problem of measurability (and actual measurement) of given phenomena, the main purpose of the anthropological approach is to better understand such phenomena and to catch their deeper sense.

The philosophical foundations of the anthropological approach can be summarized as follows. (i) Researchers can be considered as research instruments themselves (Belk et al. 1989), because during their field-work they participate in the context. (ii) Researchers do not approach a field setting to test preconceived hypotheses, but attempt to acquire the subject’s point of view (or native’s point of view, Geertz 1973), and hence work inductively rather than deductively. (iii) There are different levels of analysis, based on the activities of listening and looking. (iv) Research outputs are detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors; quotations from people; informed interpretation of the meaning of cultural artifacts in context.

Traditionally, naturalistic inquiry is based on the use of three main techniques: (i) participation (learning by doing); (ii) observation (learning by watching); (iii) elicitation (learning by asking). Such techniques are usually employed simultaneously, in order to enrich the researcher’s experience in the field and reach a better comprehension through “triangulation”.

Potential weaknesses of this type of approach are undoubtedly numerous. Misunderstanding of data collected, wrong interpretations of informants’ discourses and behaviors, as well as misrepresenting of the research

setting are common. In these cases, the reader can take the risk to uncritically accept the results of the researcher especially when the writing is compelling. In order to avoid these biases, however, member checks and/or external auditors can be involved during the process of data analysis. The representation of knowledge developed through the fieldwork should at least give the reader the possibility to be critical.

Marketing scholars started acknowledging the relevant contribution of the anthropological perspective to the understanding of consumer culture more than 20 years ago (Levy 1978; Hunt 1983; Sherry 1983)¹. On the road paved by pioneers in the 1980s (e.g. Sherry 1983; Sherry and McGrath 1989; McCracken 1986), empirical contributions adopting such approach have more recently become increasingly common, and have studied a variety of issues relevant for marketing, including object relations (e.g. Belk 1988; McCracken 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), retailing (Sherry 1990a; Sherry 1990b), brand loyalty (Belk et al. 1989), diffusion of innovation (Arnould 1989), advertising and communication (e.g. Sherry and Camargo 1987), as well as experiential consumption (e.g. Arnould and Price 1993).

In spite of this diffusion in consumer marketing, the anthropological perspective has not found room in industrial marketing research yet, in spite of the fact that organizational buying behavior scholars consider it highly useful for their object of inquiry (Ward and Webster 1998). The present paper constitutes hence an attempt to introduce anthropological methods in the field of industrial marketing and purchasing research.

3 The Empirical Study

The *empirical setting* for our anthropological exploration of visitor behavior at professional trade show consisted of five events dedicated to different phases of the fashion industry* (Table 1): two of such events are dedicated to semi-finished products (i.e. yarns for knitting, fabrics, accessories like buttons), and are hence mainly visited by apparel firms' buyers and designers; three events are instead dedicated to end products (i.e., clothing), and are hence mainly visited by international chains of retailers and small independent ones. The trade shows were selected in order to include consolidated, international initiatives (e.g. Pitti Immagine Uomo, Pitti Immagine Filati, Moda In), which are the most important initiatives in Italy and among the most important in Europe (CERMES 2002), together with innovative events of smaller dimensions (White, Neozone). All events are held either in Milan or Florence, which are the locations that traditionally host fashion trade shows in Italy.

¹ In consumer marketing research, application of anthropology and its methods was driven by different motivations (Sherry 1998). A major one was the emerging dissatisfaction about the possibilities, and objectives, of conventional and established research strategies (e.g. Sheth 1982, Anderson 1983, 1986; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Hirschman 1989). Such a dissatisfaction induced a social drama in academic community (Sherry 1998) and an epistemological debate reflected also in academic publications (e.g. Calder and Tybout 1987, Anderson 1988a, 1988b; Siegel 1988). Advocating the need for multidisciplinary approaches, alternative perspectives started to be applied in consumer research, and anthropology was considered particularly suited to study the cultural dimension in consumer behavior (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Appadurai 1986; Sherry 1983; McCracken 1986, 1988).

Table 1: *The trade shows investigated*

Trade Show	Location and Dates	Space Hired (sqm.)	Exhibitors	Professional Visitors
<i>Pitti Filati Exhibition on Yarns, Fibres and Knitted Fabrics</i>	Florence (I) 4-6 Feb 2004	27,500	104 (12.5% foreign) Yarn and Fabric producers	6,953 (36.5% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Moda In Textile and Accessories Exhibition</i>	Milan (I) 9-11 Feb 2004	15,000	398 (22.6% foreign) Fabrics, embroideries, and fashion accessories producers	17,776 (14.9% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Pitti Uomo Men's Fashion Fair</i>	Florence (I) 8-11 Jan 2004	55,000	793 (35.6% foreign) Menswear producers	26,173 (34.3% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>NeoZone</i>	Milan (I) 27 Feb-1 Mar 2004	n.a.	131 Mainly women wear producers	5,647 (26.6% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>White</i>	Milan (I) 27 Feb-1 Mar 2004	n.a.	42 Mainly women wear producers	3,020 (23.3% foreign) Mainly retailers

The *research team* was composed of six researchers with varying levels of expertise in ethnographic methods. Each participant had previous field experience with trade shows and/or familiarity with the sub-culture of the specific industries investigated. The research team realized the following activities (Table 2).

Participant Observation – Each researcher conducted extensive participant observation at each trade show for its entire duration that included the realization of photography, videography and field notes on various aspects of the exhibitions (e.g. structure of hall and stands, visitor/exhibitor behaviour). For some of the trade shows, a significant part of the time spent in the field was devoted to tracking of one-two informants during their visit experience (usually one or two days): in other words, the researchers followed the informants during their activities; when needed, they were asked to explain the motivation behind behaviors. This helped researcher to “see the world” (at least to some extent) as the informants did, and to establish an emphatic relationship with them.

Structured Observation of stands – This activity was performed because an emergent research finding regarded visitor evaluation of booth morphology and design. Overall, we observed with a pre-defined grid more than 400 booths, ranging from 26% to 100% of the overall population of exhibitors within each trade show.

In-depth interviews with visitors and exhibitors – Typically, the first day of field activity at trade show was dedicated to a “mapping” of the field and unstructured observation of visitor behavior. Starting from the second day of observation, in-depth interviews with suppliers and, mainly, visitors were realized. These longer interviews permitted to deepen the knowledge and insights obtained through the much shorter brief talks with exhibitors and visitors realized in the context of the participant observation.

Table 2: *Overview of research activities*

Trade show	Research group	Research activities	Output of research activities
<i>Pitti Filati</i>	6 researchers / 4 days	Participant observation Tracking of visitors Interviews with exhibitors (15) Interviews with visitors (27) Structured analysis of 98 booths (94% of total)	About 300 pages of transcriptions of field notes and interviews 98 analysis of booths 9 hours of video Pictures
<i>Moda In</i>	6 researchers / 4 days	Participant observation Tracking of visitors Interviews with exhibitors (5) Interviews with visitors (12) Structured analysis of 206 booths (52% of total)	About 250 pages of transcriptions of field notes and interviews 8 hours of video Pictures
<i>Pitti Uomo</i>	6 researchers / 4 days	Participant observation Interviews with exhibitors (8) Interviews with visitors (25) Structured analysis of 205 booths (26% of total)	More than 200 pages of transcriptions of field notes and interviews 3 hours of video 205 analysis of booths Pictures
<i>NeoZone</i>	2 researchers / 1 day	Participant observation 8 interviews with exhibitors and visitors Structured analysis of 131 booths (100% of total)	20 pages of transcriptions of field notes and interviews
<i>White</i>	2 researchers / 1 day	Participant observation Structured analysis of 42 booths (100% of total)	10 pages of transcriptions of field notes

4 Main Findings and Discussion

Although a complete, “thick” ethnographic analysis cannot be reported in this paper, due to space limitations, some of our main findings are described below.

(a) The institutionalized nature of trade shows

In the discourse of many of our informants, trade shows are characterized as having a taken-for-granted status; in other words, participating is considered “natural”, and avoiding to do so cannot be even conceived. This is particularly evident in the case of those exhibitors that are questioning on rational grounds the issue of returns on investments. Participating in a trade show, particularly at the international level (i.e., Pitti Uomo, Moda In, Pitti Filati), requires huge investments for exhibitors, particularly in the case of the important companies reputed as leaders in their sectors, that have to present themselves adequately. Nowadays, however, trade shows do not repay themselves (immediately): in the past, it was common for buyers to make orders during a trade show, but these are now “memories of the past”, and the returns of the investments cannot be measured on sales realized during the event, but rather on the more intangible (and often unmeasured) image benefits. And yet, even when a trade show is no more justified from a purely economic logic, it takes time to “forsake” it, as is evident in the words of this leading Tuscan yarn producer.

“We exhibited for many years to this French trade fair ... for ten years, and we did believe to it, I mean, for ten years, not two days ... we visited it in order to understand if it could work, and then we went there, together with other important Italian yarn producers. But one day we said: ‘Gentlemen, this is not our place!’ ... Because ... 80% of visitors came to see a product of a certain type [i.e., of lower quality], and not the product that we presented. Automatically, a number of Italian yarn producers drew back ... and we abandoned it ... It was not a painless decision ... For two or three seasons, I, personally, did not have the courage to take this decision, but my colleagues, my friends [i.e., producers of Prato yarn district] were in the same situation. At the end, we looked at each other into the eyes, and we said ‘I am not going there anymore.’ ... It is not so easy to abandon a trade show ... You cannot invest in it for 10 years and then, suddenly [abandon it] ... It is not possible”.

This lengthy quotation also highlights the impact of similar, relevant others in individual decisions, that is evident in the decision to either continue a participation or to discontinue it. These inertial phenomena support an interpretation of trade shows as institutions (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and exhibitor participation as “infused with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (Selznick 1957). Once infused with value, trade shows achieve a taken-for-granted status that is hard to question. De-institutionalization processes are however possible, since trade show participation seems to be regulated by mimetic pressures to isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), that lead to similar patterns of behavior: both competitor participation to a new trade show and competitor withdrawing from a consolidated one may lead to fast imitation by rivals.

For exhibitors, then, participation in a trade show is not necessarily the result of the rational decision-making process that is implied by most scholarly research in this field. Trade show organizers sometimes exploit isomorphic pressures by mentioning the expected participation of competitors during their sales initiatives. Indeed, more research is needed in order to shed more light on the issue.

(b) Trade shows as a place of “free” information externalities

A first, partially unexpected result of our analysis was the heterogeneity of visitor motivations to attend trade shows. Many of the visitors we observed and spoke with were neither customers nor prospects, involved in a search of solutions, suppliers, products, but rather individuals involved in “learning expeditions” of different typologies (see Table 3).

Competitors of exhibiting firms have many faces, ranging from companies belonging to the same industrial districts (which send their designers, technicians, and representatives to gather information about the new collections launched by direct rivals) to Far East producers (who are not considered rivals in strict sense, since their quality – and price – levels are very far from that of European producers, and are consequently considered “imitators”). All are encountered as visitors at trade shows. Competitors visit trade shows to gather intelligence about their rivals, their new products, their strategic moves or, more simply, to obtain ideas about incremental innovations and new products. The presence of imitators was very evident to members of the research groups: although in all fashion trade shows taking pictures is strictly forbidden, we saw several times visitors taking digital pictures of products. In one remarkable occasion, we were present when an angry exhibitor threw out of his stand a Taiwanese visitor who had been caught taking pictures of a product’s details.

Suppliers of exhibiting firms (e.g. fabric producers at apparel trade shows) are present for several reasons: to meet their present customers and to find new ones, but also to obtain knowledge about both their customers (i.e. the exhibitors) and their customers’ customers (i.e., the visitors). By visiting downstream markets trade shows, these suppliers are able to develop “foresight of the customer’s end market” (Gibbert et al. 2004), which inspires ideas for their own innovations.

Companies in related industries (e.g. producers of shirts – which are made of fabric and not of yarns – at yarn for knitting trade shows) were unexpectedly found in numbers in all trade shows investigated. These companies are neither customers nor competitors or suppliers of exhibitors, but nevertheless found useful to visit trade shows that are, in line of principle, unrelated to their business, but to whom they attribute a relevant informative value.

Exhibitors are obviously aware of the fact that, during trade shows, they will meet visitors that are not, and could never become, customers. Their attitude varies from overt hostility and intolerance (in the case of imitators) to slight annoyance (in the case of the many “curious” that asks for catalogues, samples, gadgets, and “let us waste our time”).

The picture of trade shows that emerges from our description is one of highly relevant informative events, that attract many subjects in “learning expeditions”: this view is rather similar to that proposed by Rosson and Seringhaus (1995), according to which trade fairs can be conceptualized as “microcosms of the industries they represent, with a multitude of buyers and sellers, service providers, partners, industry and regulatory bodies all gathered in one place” and interacting with each other with several objectives in mind. From a different perspective, the trade shows we analyzed are indeed field-configuring events (Lampel and Meyer 2008), i.e. events that “assemble actors from diverse geographies and organizations” for a limited period of time, “provide unstructured opportunities for face-to-face social interaction”, and “are occasions for information exchange and collective sense-making”.

A key point, however, is that the presence of a significant part of visitors does not repay exhibitors of their marketing investments. In this light, exhibitors can be considered as provider of free externalities to all

Table 3: *Visitors at trade shows: not only prospects*

Visitor typology (respect to exhibitors)	Main reasons to visit	Exemplificative quotes
Competitors	Competitive intelligence Ideas for innovation from competitors	<p>“It’s important to walk around here, because we see how companies facing the same problems we face solved them: if they found a solution, we could do the same” (fabric producer at Moda In)</p> <p>“We do not really copy what we see ... exactly as we see it: there is always an elaboration, perhaps in the future I will remember a detail I saw today and I will use it” (designer at Pitti Uomo)</p> <p>“We are exhibitor here ... we come here [at the trend area] to see what the others [i.e., competitors] have done” (Yarn producers at Pitti Filati)</p>
Suppliers	Market intelligence End market foresight	<p>“I am here to identify potential customers among exhibitors ... So I am analyzing their offer to see if I can serve them or not” (Yarn producer at Moda In)</p> <p>“I want to understand how my customers have used my yarns, how they have finished them, their final use...” (Yarn producers at Moda In)</p> <p>“Exhibitors here are our customers: I come here to see which are the novelties: if apparel companies are increasingly producing ‘used look’ apparel, then I have to develop for next season fabrics that may easily treated to become ‘used look’” (Fabric producer at Pitti Uomo)</p>
Firms in related industries	Search for inspiration	<p>“These trade shows are useful not only for those who work in the apparel industry, but also ... to those whose job involves a new trend: for example those who work in furniture, accessories as shows, jewels, etc.” (Style bureau at Pitti Uomo)</p> <p>“We went to ‘Abitare il tempo’ [a furniture trade show], and we saw these terrific curtain fabrics, very much Gucci-style, and we used the same pattern to design some [women] night dresses that were so impressive ... In another occasion I went to a stone trade show ... I saw these fossils ... and used them to create a necklace, a unique piece” (two independent designers at Moda In)</p>

visitors that are not (at least potentially) customers: from their individual point of view, however, the figures regarding overall visitor attendance, diffused by trade show organizers, do not necessarily mirror the extension of the target groups whose hoped presence motivate their participation.

(c) Prospect behavior as ritual

At trade shows, visitors searching for pre-purchase information usually perform highly ritualized activities, realized with minor variants and that, to some extent, reflect their specific professional background (e.g. designers will behave differently from buyers). Many visitors approach the exhibition knowing already the location of the area they want to visit, the suppliers they want to meet and the stands they cannot miss. Many activities are considered “a must”, i.e., they “have to” be done. Year after year, event after event, visitors, and exhibitors, too, participate in the perpetuation of these rituals. Repeating the same steps during the visit, they maintain a way of living the experience of trade shows which new comers, or occasional visitors, acquire quite quickly. These ways of moving “in the place” are revealed in all the activities and discourses, and can represent a sort of “collective performance” of trade show. Each actor performs his/her own character, repeating a given role, act after act. And, as it happens in artistic performance, this play has a sense because of the presence of all the characters at a given stage. What is difficult to discern is the importance of this ritual for visitors. They can be interpreted as both a strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance when subject to a high intensity and variety of information stimuli or to optimize activities under time constrains.

In the case of the trade shows dedicated to semi-finished products (i.e., Pitti Filati and Moda In), a first step of the visit, for most prospects, is the “trend area” (see Picture 1), which is realized by the organizers in order to provide an orientation to visitors, and to speed up their visit. The trend area contains a synthesis of the novelties presented at the trade show: each exhibitor is required to contribute with 1-2 samples of yarn or fabric (typically selected in order to represent the “best” of the exhibitor’s new collection), that is creatively arranged by the organizer. Thanks to the trend area, prospects are able to quickly identify suppliers with products they find interesting, and this opportunity drastically reduces the physical and cognitive effort that would be otherwise needed in order to visit all exhibitors. Visitors of apparel trade shows do not benefit from a trend area, and the gathering of information about trends and the selection of new suppliers is more tough: to have a complete picture of the novelties, prospects have to tour all over the fairground, and this may be rather fatiguing, particularly in the case of the bigger trade shows (e.g. Pitti Uomo), where the huge number of exhibitors means that no visitors will ever be able to “extract” all the informative value of the trade show. To use the words of one of our informants: *“I know I always miss something”*.



Figure 1: *The synthesis area at Moda In (authors' elaboration)*

Visiting present suppliers is an obliged step for most companies, one that is realized as soon as possible. Of course, such visits have limited informative value: in the case of stable supply relationships, there are always other occasions that can be dedicated to showing new products, negotiate prices, and discuss problems (e.g. sale representatives' visits). Nevertheless, for most visitors the first day is dedicated to pay "courtesy visit" to their suppliers, to socialize with their human resources, to accept hospitality in the form of food and drink, a relaxing pause from the tiring visit, possible invitations for lunch or dinner. For exhibitors, the ritual of the "good host" is a way to deepen their relationship with their customer, and to create the relaxed environment that is useful to develop mutual trust. A further advantage of this hosting activity is that it permits to the human resources that are not usually in contact with customers (e.g. designers, top managers, entrepreneurs) to develop knowledge of customers problems, a knowledge that is highly valued since it provides ideas for innovation.

For visitors, their suppliers' booths are considered "anchorage points", similar to landmarks in an otherwise unexplored landscape. Nevertheless, most of the visitors' time will be dedicated to explore the unexpected, and to obtain in a rather unplanned way information useful to the purchase process. In this almost random search for insights, prospects do not necessarily (want to) find new suppliers, but at least they obtain *reassurance* and *inspiration*. The search for inspiration was a leitmotiv recurrent in our informants' discourse. For buyers visiting semi-finished products trade shows (i.e., Moda In and Pitti Filati), the process of inspiration entailed taking note of a detail about a product that could be useful for new product development; for retailers visiting end products trade shows (e.g. Pitti Uomo, White), inspiration will refer to ideas for new products to introduce in their points of sale.

"Sometimes, you know, when you design new collections ... you have to be inspired ... perhaps I see a collar here and suddenly I get inspired and obtain the idea around which I build the new collection" (clothing designer at Pitti Filati)

“The trade show is a starting point where you go to find the idea, the new fabrics, the colors ... to find the inspiration ... Then everybody will make his own the ideas that are nearest to his products, and will take them as a starting point” (clothing entrepreneur at Moda In)

“This year, many producers are proposing pullovers made in organic fibres, that is a new trend, and I am going to order some” (small independent retailer at Pitti Uomo).

Reassurance is another powerful motivation to wander around at a trade show: by comparing present suppliers with their more direct competitors, it is possible to reduce the possible cognitive dissonance deriving from not being sure of whether to maintain a supplier, or which of its products to purchase.

“I come here to see the new trend ... In this way, I will be prepared when sales representatives will come to show me the new collections ... I will know what to choose. For example, if I see here a lot of velvet, then I will select those collections that are more in line with this trend” (Small independent retailer at Pitti Uomo)

A consequence of the fact that inspiration and reassurance are major determinant of the explorative search for information of many visitors is that, in many cases, attracting prospect attention with new products and solution does not necessarily lead to “conquer them”, i.e. to start a new commercial relation. In other words, once reassured, a customer will stick with its present suppliers; and once inspired, a customer will likely ask its present suppliers to satisfy their newly emerged need. This is not to say that trade shows are not useful to find new suppliers: on the contrary, most of our informants said that many of their long-established supply relationships started at a trade show. Many visitors, entering an exhibitor’s booth and asking for information, samples, catalogs, however, will never become customers: they will simply use exhibitors as, once again, providers of “free” externalities. In sum, after explorations, very often prospects come back to their anchorage points.

“I am not here to look for new suppliers: If a supplier is ok, there is no reason to change it, it is better to maintain an old supplier with whom a trust relationship exists. At most, every season I will add one or two new suppliers, but only if they can provide product innovative and original, that my present suppliers do not have” (Small independent retailer at Pitti Uomo)

(d) Exhibitors stance on the “free” externality issue

As previously discussed, exhibitors provide inputs to the information gathering activities of many visitors that will never become customers. Some exhibitors react to this situation, and adopt countermeasures. One basic strategy, in this sense, is the so called “hiding oneself” strategy (Borghini and Rinallo 2003), that consists in adopting a booth design that does not permit visitors to see products from outside the booth (e.g. it may lack window displays). In all of the trade shows we investigated, a significant part of the exhibitors hid their products from external gazes, e.g. 17% in the case of Pitti Filati and Moda In, 12% in the case of Pitti Uomo².

An emblematic example of this approach is constituted by the Moda In exhibitor whose booth is shown in Picture 2: on the one hand, such booth does have a window display; on the other, no product is shown inside it. Since exhibitors have to pay an additional fee if they want a window display, we interpreted the absence of

² These data are the result of the structured observation realized by the members of the research team, as previously explained. Although also White and NeoZone were similarly analyzed, the concept of these events is quite dissimilar from that of the other trade shows, so they are not comparable to this respect.

products from the window display as an on-site decision, rather than a planned one, arguably due to a conflict between opposing intentions: that of attracting new customers, and that of avoiding imitation. We observed that in most cases leading companies tend to “hide” themselves, because they are both the most imitated and so well-known not to incur the risk of losing business. On the contrary, less known companies tend to “show” their products from outside, in order to attract prospects.



Figure 2: *An exhibitor's booth at Moda In: Products are not visible from outside (authors' elaboration)*

Beside booth design, other solutions are available to exhibitors in order to reduce the risk of imitation. For example, a button producer exhibiting at Moda In showed in its window display “false” new products, i.e., products designed in order to be completely different from the new collection presented at the trade show, with the purpose of “confusing competitors and imitators”. Such methods, however, do not protect against the risk of prospect opportunistic behavior, e.g. when prospects asks for samples of new products that will be realized by their present suppliers. In this situation, some exhibitors adopt “black lists” or similar arrangements.

“I was tired of providing samples of my new collections and then discover that they had asked their low-cost, far eastern suppliers to copy it ... Now we have a black list containing the names of all companies that, for the last six years, have visited our stand, taken samples, and never made an order ... Now, they cannot enter here anymore” (Entrepreneur of a leading yarn producer, exhibiting at Pitti Filati)

“Curious visitors cannot enter here ... We’ve got a list created with the help of our sales representatives. It contains the names of all high quality retailers that are our customers, or that could be ... If you are not on the list, you cannot visit our stand” (Leading apparel producers, exhibiting at Pitti Uomo)

These methods to reduce “free” externalities have the effect to limit the number of visitors entering a stand, but to “increase their quality”. Some visitors are critical of such methods, and particularly the lack of external visibility of product. Of course, in the case of present customers, the external visibility of new collections does not appear to matter, since there are no psychological barriers to enter the stand. For prospects and other kind of visitors (e.g. competitors, suppliers, etc.), however, this lack of visibility is particularly annoying.

“It is a nonsense ... Trade shows are communication instruments... You cannot exhibit at a trade show and not to communicate... These exhibitors should not do that” (Apparel firm at Moda In)

It therefore seems that the extent to which this approach is diffused, exhibitors are able to protect their products from competitor imitation and customer opportunistic behavior, but the trade show’s overall informative value decreases for all visitors.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we adopted anthropological methods, based on participation, observation and elicitation, in order to provide a better understanding of visitor behavior at professional trade shows and their role in the pre-purchase search for information of industrial buyers. By doing so, we followed Cova and Salle’s (2003, 2008) suggestion to adopt postmodern approaches, nowadays consolidated in consumer marketing, also in industrial marketing research.

Our results consist in detailed description of observed behaviours, quotations, and informed interpretations of visitor experience of five B2B trade shows regarding both semi-finished and end products. More specifically, we draw a picture of trade shows as informative events, where exhibitors (often unwillingly) produce free externalities that benefit different typologies of subjects: prospects, competitors, suppliers, firms of related industries. Our analysis shed light on the fact that most of these subjects do not repay the exhibitors of the (sometimes huge) investments necessary to participate to trade show. Although our results are limited in that we only investigated events in the fashion pipeline, which has its own specificity, we suspect that themes similar to those we identified also recur in other industries: further research will permit to confirm this suspect.

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This paper was originally presented at the 2004 Industrial Marketing & Purchasing (IMP) Conference, and has been available since then on the IMP Group website (Borghini, S., Golfetto, F. and Rinallo, D. (2004): Using Anthropological Methods to Study Industrial Marketing and Purchasing: An Exploration of Professional Trade Shows. Paper presented at the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Conference (Copenhagen), http://www.impgroup.org/paper_view.php?viewPaper=4505). We feel honored that this work was selected to be included in SPACES Online, and would like to thank Harald Bathelt and Johannes Glückler for providing a platform for us to engage in a conversation with colleagues from outside the field of marketing.

Ten years have passed since we wrote this paper – a fact that should be kept in mind by readers. We therefore take this opportunity to write a few accompanying notes. First, this work represents our first ethnographic exploration of trade shows, at a time when we felt the need to justify a methodological choice that had not been adopted before by business-to-business marketing scholars, but which was gaining currency in mainstream marketing and cultural investigations of consumer behavior. This paper paved the way for further ethnographic studies of trade shows and industrial buyer behavior (Borghini et al. 2006; Rinallo and Golfetto 2006; Rinallo et al. 2010), in which reviewers and journal editors did not question our methodological choices. We are happy that our work constitutes a methodological precedent for other ethnographic fieldwork in our field.

Second, we decided not to update our original reference list – except in the case of working papers subsequently published. We feel that some of the points we raised – particularly with respect to studying visitor behavior – can complement current methodological approaches in business-to-business marketing and trade show literature, mostly based on survey research and case studies.

Third, in 2004 our knowledge of economic geography was limited. We would not have imagined that our work would attract the attention of scholars outside our field and were happy to realize that trade shows had become a key research site for economic geographers interested in a relational and knowledge-based understanding of industrial clusters.

Overall, this paper mostly deals with learning and knowledge-acquisition practices at trade shows. It is much less concerned with space, which we left in the background as we could not find ways to make it theoretically relevant. It was only thanks to scholarship on trade shows as temporary clusters that our work has started lending justice to a geographical understanding of trade shows which, in our view, is essential to better understand these events and their role in the global economy. Our hope is that marketing literature on trade shows can similarly add depth to the theory building endeavors of economic geographers.

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