

Using anthropological methods to study industrial marketing and purchasing:

An exploration of professional trade shows

Stefania Borghini
Business Management Department
Bocconi University
Via Filippetti 9
20122 Milan, Italy
Tel. +39.(0)2.5836.3736
Fax +39.(02).5836.3691
E-mail: stefania.borghini@uni-bocconi.it

Francesca Golfetto
Business Management Department
Bocconi University
Via Filippetti 9
20122 Milan, Italy
Tel. +39.(0)2.5836.3736
Fax +39.(02).5836.3791
E-mail: francesca.golfetto@uni-bocconi.it

Diego Rinallo
Business Management Department
Bocconi University
Via Filippetti 9
20122 Milan, Italy
Tel. +39.(0)2.5836.3719
Fax +39.(02).5836.3791
E-mail: diego.rinallo@uni-bocconi.it

Using anthropological methods to study industrial marketing and purchasing

An exploration of professional trade shows

Borttaget: and purpose of the paper

Abstract

In this paper, we follow the suggestion of Cova & 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.

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 IMP Conference, however, Cova & 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 maximizing the returns of such huge investments is hence considered highly relevant by practitioners. Although many contributions now exist on trade show effectiveness¹, empirical results are however 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 S & Lilien, 1995). In their search of information, they face however constraints in term 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 booth, 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, they 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 & Ruiz, 1999). Although some research on trade show visitors exists (e.g., Bello, 1992; Bello & Lothia, 1993; Dudley, 1990; Morris, 1988; Munuera & 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, in gestures, in dialogs and discourses, more in 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 & Venkatesh, 1993; 1995; Sherry, 1998; Podestà & Addis, forthcoming). By espousing the idea of a need of pluralism of perspectives and methods (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), we think that our contribution is a further step toward the direction indicated by Cova & Salle (2003).

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, preeminently, 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 (developing the so called “naturalistic inquiry”). (ii) Researchers do not approach a field setting to test preconceived hypothesis, 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 should 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)². On the road paved by pioneers in the 1980s (e.g., Sherry, 1983; Sherry & 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 & Arnould, 1988), retailing (Sherry, 1990a, 1990b), brand loyalty (Belk et al., 1989), diffusion of innovation (Arnould, 1989), advertising and communication (e.g., Sherry & Camargo, 1987), experiential consumption (e.g., Arnould & 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 & Webster, 1998). The present paper constitutes hence an attempt to introduce anthropological methods in the field of industrial marketing and purchasing research.

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 industry³ (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.

--- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

The *research team* was composed of 6 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 shows 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

Borttaget: *Unstructured*

Borttaget: visited each of the trade shows for its entire duration (3-4 days each)

Borttaget: realised several brief

Borttaget: (colloqui? Qual è il modo tecnico di chiamarli in etnografia?) with For example, exhibitors were asked for the reasons behind some specific booth features or possible reactions in case of competitor absence, while visitors were asked for the preferred booths and most liked experience during the trade show. In most cases, (dire qui delle interviste riprese con la telecamera, mi manca la terminologia in inglese)

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.

--- INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

Main Findings and Discussion

Although a complete, “thick” ethnographic analysis cannot be reported in this paper, due to space limitations, some of our main findings⁴ are described below.

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 to a trade show, particularly in the case of those of 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: 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 visit 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 wasn’t a painless decision ... For two or three seasons, I, personally, didn’t 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’m 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 both continue a participation and to discontinue it. These inertial phenomena support an interpretation of trade shows as institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & 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 & 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 to 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.

Trade shows as a place of “free” informative 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 not customers or 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, 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’ 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, Golfetto & Zerbini, 2004), which inspire 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 description⁵ is one of highly relevant informative events, that attract many subjects in "learning expeditions": this view is rather similar to that proposed by Rosson & 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 (Meyer, 2003), 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 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.

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 can't 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" is 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 in a given stage. What it 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”*.

--- INSERT PICTURE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

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 situations that can be dedicated to showing new products, negotiate prices, 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 time dedicated to the visit will be dedicated to exploration of 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's a new trend, and I'm 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’ll be prepared when sales representatives will come to show me the new collections ... I’ll know what to choose. For example, if I see here a lot of velvet, then I’ll 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 informant 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’m not here to look for new suppliers: If a supplier is ok, there’s no reason to change it, it’s better to maintain an old supplier with whom a trust relationship exists. At most, every season I’ll add one or two new suppliers, but only if they can provide product innovative and original, that my present suppliers don’t have” (Small independent retailer at Pitti Uomo)

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 & 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 Uomo⁶.

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 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.

--- INSERT PICTURE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

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 can’t 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’re not in the list, you can’t 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’s a nonsense ... Trade shows are communication instruments... You cannot exhibit at a trade show and not to communicate... These exhibitors shouldn’t 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.

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 & Salle's (2003) 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.

¹ See Borghini, Golfetto & Rinallo (2003) for a critical review.

² 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, & 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 & 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 & Isherwood, 1979; Appadurai, 1986; Sherry, 1983; McCracken, 1986; 1988).

³ In order to increase our understanding of visitors' behaviour within trade shows, however, in the next few months several other trade shows, belonging to different industries (e.g. furniture, mechanical engineering, subcontracting) are going to be researched by the authors and their research group.

⁴ Readers should keep in mind that, as usual in ethnographic analyses, only some emergent research findings are reported here because of the need to maintain the paper focus.

⁵ A description that is not, because of space limits, as thick as we would have liked it to be.

⁶ 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.

References

- Anderson P., 1983. Marketing, scientific progress, and scientific method. *Journal of Marketing*, **47** (Fall): 18-31.
- Anderson P., 1986. On Method in Consumer Research: A Critical Relativist Perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **13** (2): 155-173.
- Anderson, P., 1988a. Relativism Redivivus: In Defence of Critical Relativism. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **15** (3): 403-406.
- Anderson P., 1988b. Relative to What-That is the Question: A Replay to Siegel, *Journal of Consumer Research*, **15** (1): 133-137.
- Appadurai A. (ed.), 1986. *The Social Life of Things*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arnould E., 1989. Preference formation and the diffusion of innovation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **16** (2): 239-267.
- Arnould E., and Price L., 1993. River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **20** (1): 24-95.
- Belk R., 1988. Possessions and the extend self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **15** (2): 139-168.
- Belk R., Wallendorf M., and Sherry J. F., 1989. The Sacred and Profane in Consumer Behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **16** (1): 1-38.
- Bello DC. 1992. Industrial buyer behavior at trade shows: Implications for selling effectiveness. *Journal of Business Research* **25**: 59-80.
- Bello DC and Lohtia R. 1993. Improving trade show effectiveness by analyzing attendees. *Industrial Marketing Management* **22** (November): 311-318.
- Black R. 1986. *The Trade Show Industry: Management and Marketing Career Opportunities*. Trade Show Bureau, East Orleans, MA.
- Blythe J. 2002. Using trade fairs in key account management. *Industrial Marketing Management* **31**: 627-635.
- Borghini S., and Rinallo D. 2003. A fair(y) tale: The semiotics of b2b communication. Paper presented at the 2003 IMP Conference, Lugano, 4th-7th September.
- Borghini S., Golfetto, F., Rinallo, D. 2003. In search of good data to study industrial trade fair performance: Extracting data from firms' exhibit. Paper presented at the INFORMS Marketing Science Conference, University of Maryland, Baltimore
- Brown S., 1997. Marketing Science in a Postmodern World: Introduction to the Special Issue, *European Journal of Marketing*, **31** (3/4): 167-182.
- Calder B. and Tybout A., 1987. What Consumer Research Is.... *Journal of Consumer Research*, **14** (1): 136-140.
- CERMES. 2001. The European Trade Fair Market: Structural Dimensions and Emerging Trends. Unpublished Research Report, Bocconi University.
- CERMES. 2002. Manifestazioni Fieristiche del Sistema Moda – Persona. Unpublished Research Report, Bocconi University.
- CERMES. 2004. Annual Report on the European Trade Fair Market. Bocconi University.
- Cova B and Salle R. 2003. When IMP-Don Quixote Tilts His Lance Against The Kotlerian Windmills: BtoB Marketing Deeply Changed During The Last 25 Years, BtoC Marketing Too. Paper presented at the 2003 IMP Conference, Lugano, 4th-7th September.

- DiMaggio, P.J., and Powell, WW. 1983. The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review* **35**: 147-160.
- Douglas M., and Isherwood B, 1979. *The World of Goods*, New York: Basic Books.
- Firat A. F., and Venkatesh A. 1993. Postmodernity: The Age of Marketing, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, **10** (3): 227-249.
- Firat A. F., and Venkatesh A. 1995. Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption, *Journal of Consumer Research*, **22**: 239-267.
- Geertz C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Basic Books
- Gibbert, M., Golfetto, F., and Zerbini, F. 2004. The industrial supplier as a competence marketer: Upstream and downstreams implications at Siemes. Working Paper, Bocconi University.
- Golfetto F. 1997. Le fiere nel mix di comunicazione aziendale. *Economia & Management* (5): 41-50.
- Golfetto F. 2004. *Fiere e Comunicazione: Strumenti per le Imprese e il Territorio*. Milan: EGEA.
- Gopalakrishna S., and Lilien G. 1995. A three-stage model of industrial trade show performance. *Marketing Science* **14** (Winter): 22-42.
- Harris M. 1971. *Culture, people, and nature*. New York: Crowell.
- Hirschman E, 1989. *Interpretive Consumer Research*. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- Holbrook M., and O'Shaughnessy J., 1988. On the Scientific Status of Consumer Research and the Need for an Interpretive Approach to Studying Consumption Behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **15** (3): 398-402.
- Hudson L., and Ozanne J. 1988. Alternative Ways of Seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research, *Journal of Consumer Research*, **14** (4): 508-521
- Hunt S, 1983. *Marketing theories: The philosophy of marketing science*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Levy S, 1978. Hunger and Work in a Civilized Tribe: or, the Anthropology of Market Transactions. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 21 (March/April): 557-570
- Lyotard J-F. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- McCracken G, 1988. *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- McCracken G., 1986. Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (1), 71-84.
- Meyer, J.W., and Rowan B. 1977. Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology* **83**: 340-363.
- Meyers, A. et al. 2003. Field-configuring events: How conferences and ceremonies construct technologies and industries. Symposium held at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Seattle.
- Morris MH. 1988. *Industrial and Organizational Marketing*. Merrill: Columbus, OH.
- Munuera JL & Ruiz S. 1999. Trade fairs as services: A look at visitors' objectives in Spain. *Journal of Business Research* **44**: 17-24.
- O'Hara B, Palumbo F & Herbig P. 1993. Industrial trade shows abroad. *Industrial Marketing Management* **22** (March): 233-237.
- Podestà S., & Addis M., forthcoming, Long Life to Marketing Research: A Postmodern View, *European Journal of Marketing*, forthcoming.

- Rinallo D., Golfetto F., and Borghini S. 2003. *In search of good data to study industrial trade fair performance: Extracting information from firms' exhibits*. Paper presented at the 2003 Marketing Science Conference, University of Maryland, Washington, 12-15th July.
- Rosson PJ & Seringhaus FHR. 1995. Visitor and exhibitor interaction at industrial trade fairs. *Journal of Business Research* **32**: 81-90.
- Rothschild ML. 1987. *Marketing Communications*. DC Heath and Co: Lexington.
- Selznick, P. 1957. *Leadership in administration*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Sherry J. F., 1983. Gift giving in Anthropological Perspectives. *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, **10** (2): 157-168.
- Sherry J. F., 1990a. A sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **17** (1):13-30.
- Sherry J. F., 1990b. Dealers and dealing in a periodic market: Informal retailing in ethnographic perspective. *Journal of Retailing*, **66**(2): 174-200.
- Sherry J.F. 1998. *Postmodern Alternatives: The Interpretative Turn in Consumer Behavior*, in Robertson T. S., and Kassirjian H. H., *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 548-591.
- Sherry J. F., and Camargo E., 1987. May Your Life Be Marvelous': English Language Labelling and the Semiotics of Japanese Promotion, *Journal of Consumer Research*, **14** (2): 174-188.
- Sherry J. F., and McGrath M. A., 1989. Unpacking the Holiday presence: A Comparative Ethnography of Two Gift Stores in Hirschman E. (ed.), *Interpretive Consumer Research*, Provo, UT: Association of Consumer Research, 148-167
- Sheth, J. 1982. Consumer Behavior: Shortages and Surpluses, vol. 9, Mitchell A. (eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 13-16.
- Siegel H, 1988. Relativism for Consumer research?. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **15** (1): 129-132
- Wallendorf M., and Arnould E., 1988. "My Favorite Things": A Cross Cultural Inquiry Into Object Attachment, Possessiveness, and Social Linkage. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **14** (4): 531-547.
- Ward S., and Webster F. E. 1998. Organizational Buying Behavior, in Robertson T. S., and Kassirjian H. H., *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 419-458.

Table 1 – The trade shows investigated

Trade Show	Location & Dates	Space Hired	Exhibitors	Professional Visitors
<i>Pitti Filati</i> <i>Exhibition on Yarns, Fibres & Knitted Fabrics</i>	Florence (I) 4-6 Feb 2004	27,500 sqm.	104 (12.5% foreign) Yarn & Fabric producers	6,953 (36.5% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Moda In</i> <i>Textile & Accessories Exhibition</i>	Milan (I) 9-11 Feb 2004	15,000 sqm.	398 (22.6% foreign) Fabrics, embroideries, and fashion accessories producers	17,776 (14.9% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Pitti Uomo</i> <i>Men's Fashion Fair</i>	Florence (I) 8-11 Jan 2004	55,000 sqm.	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

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 to exhibitors (15) Interviews to to 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 to exhibitors (5) Interviews to to 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 to exhibitors (8) Interviews to 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 to 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

Table 3 – Visitors at trade shows: not only prospects

Visitor Typology (respect to exhibitors)	Main reason 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 don’t 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’ll 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’m here to identify potential customers among exhibitors ... So I’m 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 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 an other 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>

Picture 1 – The synthesis area at Moda In



Source: The authors

**Picture 2 – An exhibitor's booth at Moda In:
Products are not visible from outside**



Source: The authors