

**“Same Place Next Year...”**  
**An in-depth analysis of Ongoing Search among Industrial Buyers**

***Competitive paper***

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**Abstract**

A thorough understanding of the information sources used by industrial buyers is highly significant for managerial practice. As companies communicate their offerings using a mix of tools, they need to know the relative importance their customers assign to different promotional instruments, in order to allocate the usually limited resources available for promotional activities in the best way. Despite the richness and variety on contributions on this topic, literature on organizational buying behaviour has paid limited attention to the so-called “*ongoing search*”, i.e. search activities that are independent of specific purchase needs and decisions (Bloch et al. 1986).

The main purpose of this paper is to contribute to the literature on the buyer search process by investigating in detail the behaviour of industrial buyers as they search relevant information in the context of “live communication” events like trade fairs and individual marketing events. From a methodological point of view, our research differs from conventional approaches in the study of trade shows and, more in general, the buyer search process since it relies on the ethnographic methods that are increasingly common in consumer behaviour and “mainstream” marketing (Cova and Salle 2003), where they have contributed to bridge the gap between the “ideal”, utility-maximizing individuals assumed by most studies and the much more complex reality of real consumers. Because of the interplay between theory and methods, we argue, the use of ethnographic methods paves the path to interesting discoveries also in the case of industrial buyer behaviour.

**Keywords:** ongoing search, trade shows, visitors motives, rituals, experiential marketing

## Introduction

A thorough understanding of the information sources used by industrial buyers is highly significant for managerial practice. As companies communicate their offerings using a mix of tools, they need to know the relative importance their customers assign to different promotional instruments, in order to allocate the usually limited resources available for promotional activities in the best way. Although buyers' perceptions of the importance of different communication tools have been investigated over the years (e.g., Turnbull 1974, Parasuraman 1981; Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy 2002), studies have focused only on pre-purchase or purchase situations (in other words, information gathering for a specific problem). Adopting this perspective, the literature on organizational buying behaviour (Sheth, 1973; Webster and Wind, 1972; Bunn 1993) has paid limited attention to the so-called "*ongoing search*", i.e. search activities that are independent of specific purchase needs and decisions (Bloch et al. 1986: 120). While the phenomenon has been discussed extensively in studies of consumer behaviour, it has found almost no place in work on industrial marketing.

Yet the literature regarding trade shows, which represent some of the most important influential sources of information among industrial buyers, provides proof of this phenomenon. Extant literature on the topic identified for example reasons for trade show attendance which are not related (or, at best, are only weakly related) to purchasing decisions (e.g., Godar and O'Connor 2001, Bello, 1992; Bello and Lothia, 1993; Borghini et al. 2004). The phenomenon of on-going search pose interesting challenges to the way companies operating on business markets traditionally manage their trade show participations or measure returns on trade fair investments. What if "curious" visitors, who are not interested in an immediate purchase, are not dedicated attention by the booth personnel? What if a company stop exhibiting at a trade show where most visitors are already customers? Academic literature would in effect suggest to concentrate effort on member of buying centres (Bello and Lothia 1993), or to measure returns on investments on the basis of the number of attendees from target audiences who actually make purchases following the trade participation (Gopalakrishna and Lilien 1995; Smith, Gopalakrishna and Smith 2004). Yet, visitors engaged in an on-going search are not curious, and focusing on short-term returns could be considered myopic...

The main purpose of this paper is to contribute to the literature on the buyer search process by investigating in detail the behaviour of industrial buyers as they search relevant information in the context of "live communication" events (Golfetto and Rinaldo 2004). Although we initially focused on trade shows, because of their relevance in the information mix of industrial buyers, we soon extended our investigation to private marketing events (often termed "open house"), because of their perceived usefulness among the companies we investigated. From a methodological point of view, our research differs from conventional approaches in the study of trade shows and, more in general, the buyer search process since it relies on the ethnographic methods that are increasingly common in consumer behaviour and "mainstream" marketing (Cova and Salle 2003), where they have contributed to bridge the gap between the "ideal", utility-maximizing individuals assumed by most studies and the much more complex reality of real consumers. Because of the interplay between theory and methods, we argue, the use of ethnographic methods paves the path to interesting discoveries also in the case of industrial buyer behaviour.

## Relevant literature

Studies of information search by industrial buyers are based on a consolidated tradition in the literature that dates back to the pioneering work of the 1960s and 1970s. Taken together, extant research provides a rich theoretical understanding and empirical evidence (for a review, see among others Moriarty and Spekman 1984, Lichtental et al. 1997), which helps managers define their companies' communication mix, as the type of communication instruments and the content of messages can be modulated according to buyers' information needs (Turnbull 1974; Bello 1992; Godar and O'Connor, 2001). Thus, for example, the literature soon defined a taxonomy of sources of information and applicable criteria in identifying buyer-perceived importance (e.g., Martilla 1971; Ozanne and Churchill, 1971; Parasuraman 1981). Subsequently, it became common to distinguish between commercial and non-commercial or personal and impersonal sources (Dempsey 1978).

In the following years, scholarly attention concentrated on factors influencing the use of these different sources of information during the purchasing process. Research has analysed, for instance, the impact

of product typology (Jackson et al. 1987), the stage in the purchasing process (Moriarty and Spekman, 1984; Brossard 1998), and the characteristics of the purchasing situation (Bunn 1993). Other studies in service sectors for industrial customers have highlighted the important role of personal as opposed to impersonal sources (e.g. Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 1983; Wheeler 1987). As a whole, these empirical investigations have provided the rationale for adapting the promotional mix in order to target in an effective manner the different members of the buying centre (e.g., Bello 1992; Godar and O'Connor, 2001). More recently, comparative studies have assessed the importance of these tools over time, taking account of the impact of the Internet revolution on industrial purchase decisions (e.g., Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy, 2002).

In this paper, we argue that most of these studies have generally focused only on pre-purchase or purchase situations (Sheth 1973; Webster and Wind, 1972; Bunn 1993) and failed to analyze the information search process which always occurs irrespective of whether a purchase decision is being taken (Bloch et al. 1986). In the case of trade shows, which are considered to be one of the most important means of collecting information in industrial markets (Parasuraman 1981; Godar and O'Connor 2001), it is on the other hand easy to identify numerous reasons for attendance which are not directly correlated with purchasing processes. Current buyers may seek confirmation of a past purchase or of the composition of their actual portfolio of suppliers. In both cases, they can be more concerned with reducing their cognitive dissonance rather than finding new products or providers (Godar and O'Connor 2001). Potential buyers can be more involved in developing knowledge and awareness of the range of products/services provided in the industry in order to gain new ideas (e.g., Dudley, 1990; Munuera and Ruiz 1999). Influencers of a buying centre may be more involved in gathering information to preserve their credibility within their organizations (Krapfel 1985). Moreover, non-buyers may be interested in gathering information about the industry or about technological evolutions (e.g., Dudley 1990; Morris 1988; Godar and O'Connor 2001). From the relational point of view, all categories of visitors presumably attend trade shows to establish and maintain relationships (e.g. Hansen 1994; Godar and O'Connor 2001), in other words to reduce the social as well as the technological distance from sellers (Ford 1980).

While the literature on industrial marketing provides indirect empirical proofs and theoretical support for the existence of ongoing search processes among industrial buyers, it does not identify the determinants, motives, practices, and outcomes of these processes. In our opinion, this is a gap which should be overcome in order to help suppliers avoid the risk of adopting short-sighted communication strategies.

## **Purposes and research questions**

The main objective of the present research is to investigate in depth the patterns of visitor behaviour during marketing events, in order to identify the determinants, motives, practices, and outcomes of these processes. While previous literature has identified different behaviours for the members of a buying centre, we are interested in explaining the nature of these behaviours and how and why they differ. Specifically, we analyzed two different contexts: trade shows, which may be considered "collective", comparative marketing events, and "individual" marketing events such as the so-called "open house"

The study seeks to shed light on the following research questions:

- (i) *Which are the determinants and motives which lead an industrial buyer to attend a trade show or a marketing event?* Conventional wisdom suggests that buyers visit professional trade shows in order to compare and evaluate competitive products/services, while they attend private events to reduce technological and social distance from a single supplier. In managerial practice and academic research, however, limited attention has been devoted to other determinants and motives which may be more relevant from the buyers' perspective: e.g., personal and professional involvement with the industry, technological evolution, professional updating, and so on.
- (ii) *Which are the buyers' practices in the two contexts?* In other words, how do they spend their time during the visit? How do they act practically in seeing, feeling, touching and listening to all the information stimuli they receive? To our knowledge, little empirical research has been undertaken on this matter, while sellers currently build their communication strategies on conventional wisdom.
- (iii) *What are the outcomes of the search and the perceived importance and value of the whole experience?* As proposed in consumer research literature (e.g., Bloch et al. 1986), many

outcomes in b2b contexts also seem to be related to increased product and market knowledge leading to future buying efficiencies and personal credibility, and to increased satisfaction from the search. However, we feel that further and less obvious outcomes can be found by analysing industrial buyers' behaviours.

## Methods and Empirical Setting

Our method is, essentially, an industrial market ethnography. In the context of collective and individual "live communication" events, industrial buyer information search processes, usually depicted by the literature as cognitive activities, manifest themselves in physical behaviours, that may be observed and elicited in context with the help of ethnographic methods. As previously argued, such methods are increasingly accepted employed in "mainstream" marketing and consumer behaviour research after the paradigm wars of the 1980s, thanks to the rigorous research of an increasingly numerous group of scholars that have been able to falsify the most common stereotypes usually associated to this kind of methods, e.g., the study of particular contexts as ends in themselves, the lack of managerial implications, the closure to the use of quantitative measures (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Moreover, ethnographic methods have been successfully employed to study consumers trade shows (Peñaloza 2000, 2001). Although in the business-to-business marketing scholarship the ethnographic approach is unconventional, in a recent paper presented at the IMP conference, Cova and Salle (2003) urged business-to-business scholars to get inspiration from the "bulk of rejuvenated methodologies" now employed by consumer marketing scholars, suggesting to reconsider the long-held belief that "mainstream" marketing research is not useful for the investigation of industrial markets. A suggestion that, we argue, may lead to interesting research results.

More in detail, the context for our investigation consisted of several communication events dedicated to different phases of the textile-apparel (yarns, fabrics, textile technology; accessories, apparel) and wood-furniture (semifinished products and accessories; wood-working technology; furniture) industries, held between May 2002 and the February 2005 (Table 1). As a whole, we participated to 11 trade shows, some of which in more than one editions, and to a much more limited number of open house events<sup>1</sup>. This does not however constitute a problem, because of the purpose of the present research. To paraphrase Geertz's (1973) famous axiom, our intention was not to study trade shows or private marketing events, but rather to study *in* the context of such events in order to generate new insights and extend existing theory.

As common in ethnographic approaches, we employed multiple methods and techniques to collect and analyze data (e.g., Sherry 1995; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Besides the field activities, we also analyzed data from the quantitative archives of one Italian trade fair organizer, who provided us with the results of visitor surveys regarding events in Milan from 2003 to 2004. Thus, our findings are originated from the combination of two data sets: a qualitative one, that includes the interview transcriptions, field notes, photographs and videos which are most often associated to ethnographic research, and a quantitative one that was analyzed in order to provide support to the ideas and insights generated during the fieldwork.

The research team for the fieldwork was composed of 6 researchers with varying levels of expertise in ethnographic methods and previous field experience with trade shows and/or familiarity with the professional culture of the specific industries investigated. Specifically, the activities realised by the research team consisted of observation of participants and interviews with buyers and visitors at the events.<sup>2</sup> Each research group member conducted extensive participant observation at each trade show and private event for its entire duration (from 1 to 3-4 days each). This included the realization of pictures, videos and field notes on various aspects of the exhibitions (e.g., locations, structure of exhibits, visitor/exhibitor behaviour). For some of the events, a significant part of the time spent on the field study was devoted to tracking the experience of one-two informants during their visit (usually one or two days). In other words, the researchers followed the informants during their activities, and when

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<sup>1</sup> With respect to trade shows, private marketing events are much more difficult to access for researchers; moreover, the initial focus of the study was on trade shows rather than individual events.

<sup>2</sup> In order to have a complete picture of the phenomena and the specific events investigated, we also observed and interviewed suppliers, and we occasionally interviewed organizers.

necessary, the latter were asked to explain the motivation for their behaviours. By means of these multiple perspectives and sources of data, we attempted to elucidate both the *emic* and *etic* meanings of visitor experience (Berry, 1989). This helped researchers to “see the world” (at least to some extent) in the same way as the informants and to establish an emphatic relationship with them. So far, this has resulted in nearly 80 researcher-days of field experience, over 180 interviews with visitors and exhibitors, more than 20 hours of video and several hundred pictures. The work has given rise to more than 800 pages of field notes and interview transcriptions and a dataset for the quantitative survey on visitor typologies and objectives. The qualitative data were subsequently analysed and processed in an iterative process following the methodology of the interpretive approach proposed by Spiggle (1994) and Arnould and Wallendorf (1994). In particular, triangulation between quantitative and qualitative data and the application of member checking allowed us to build a representation of the knowledge developed on the subject (Stern 1998) which was shared by all members of the research group. In the present study, we use a multiple representation strategy based on different items and perspectives in line with postmodern research (Clifford and Marcus 1986), combining quantitative and qualitative data.

**Table 1 – The empirical setting\***

<b>Trade Show</b>	<b>Location &amp; Dates</b>	<b>N. Exhibitors</b>	<b>N. Professional Visitors</b>
<i>Pitti Filati</i>	Florence (I) 4-6 Feb 2004	104 (12.5% foreign) Yarn & Fabric producers	6,953 (36.5% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Moda In</i> (two editions)	Milan (I) 9-11 Feb 2004 8-10 Sep 2004	398 (22.6% foreign) Fabrics, embroideries, and fashion accessories producers	17,776 (14.9% foreign) Mainly apparel producers
<i>Pitti Uomo</i> (two editions)	Florence (I) 8-11 Jan 2004 12-15 Jan 2005	793 (35.6% foreign) Men's wear producers	26,173 (34.3% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>NeoZone</i> (two editions)	Milan (I) 27 Feb – 1 Mar 2004 24-27 Feb 2005	131 Mainly women's wear producers	5,647 (26.6% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>White</i> (two editions)	Milan (I) 27 Feb – 1 Mar 2004 24-27 Feb 2005	42 Mainly women's wear producers	3,020 (23.3% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>Cloudnine</i>	Milan (I), 24-27 Feb 2005	39 (56.4% foreign) Mainly women's accessories producers	3,240 Mainly retailers
<i>Sasmil *</i>	Milan (I), 26-30 May 2004	406 (22.4% foreign) Accessories and semi-finished products for the furniture industry	87,095 (49.6% foreign) Furniture producers
<i>ZOW</i>	Pordenone (I), 20-23 Oct 2004	600 (25% foreign) Accessories and semi-finished products for the furniture industry	16,349 (17.8% foreign) Furniture producers
<i>Salone del Mobile</i>	Milan (I), 14-19 Apr 2004	1,498 (15.6% foreign) Furnishing, design, household goods, lights	189.655 (52.6% foreign) Mainly retailers
<i>Xylexpo *</i>	Milan (I), 26-30 May 2004	Woodworking technology producers	87,095 (49.6% foreign) Woodworking, furniture production industries
<i>LIGNA+</i>	Hannover (D), 26-30 May 2003	1,720 (50.5% foreign) Woodworking technology producers	98,267 (40.8% foreign) Forestry, woodworking, furniture production industries
<b>Open House</b>	<b>Location &amp; Dates</b>	<b>Products</b>	<b>Visitors</b>
<i>Santoni and Matec Days</i>	Brescia (I) 23-25 Sep 2004	Circular knitting technology	Current and prospect customers (i.e., fabric producers), apparel producers, media
<i>Biesse Open House "Ready to Run"</i>	Milan (I), 21-25 May 2002	Woodworking technology	Current and prospect customers (furniture producers)

\* When more editions of the same trade fair have been investigated, data about exhibitors and visitors refer to the first edition visited

## Main findings: Ongoing search as an experiential and ritual phenomenon in liminal spaces

Overall, several intriguing themes emerge from the interpretation of data collected: (1) different visitors and motives to attend events; (2) the outcomes of ongoing search processes; (3) the importance of living a direct experience during the information search; (4) the rituality of behavioural patterns.

### ***Different visitors and motives to attend events***

One first result of interest concerns the composition of trade show audiences. In line with previous studies (Bello 1992, Bello and Lothia 1993, Godar, O'Connor 2001), our research findings show that not all visitors are from buying centres and, therefore, not all are interested or even indirectly involved in the purchasing process. The interesting and particular aspect regards the distribution of the different types of visitors. While the first studies (Bello 1992, Bello and Lothia 1993) described an audience in which the visitors who were not part of a buying centre accounted for, on average, 27% of the total, the present work gives a different picture in which the percentage of this type of attendee (here called the *atypical visitor*) could be double that figure (Table 2). Apart from a few exceptions (i.e., Hansen 1994), previous literature does not highlight any visitor categories which cannot be seen in any way as potential customers or influencers: exhibitors' suppliers, competitors, and operators in related industries. In our sample, these categories represent 37% of visitors in trade shows dedicated to trade and 18% of visitors in the case of trade shows dedicated to industrial users. Exhibitors' suppliers, competitors and operators in related sectors often attend these events for many different reasons. For example, exhibitors' suppliers attend in order to collect market intelligence on downstream sectors, to realize end market foresight or to establish contacts for future sales. Exhibitors' competitors typically undertake competitive intelligence activities, collecting ideas from competing players. Finally, operators from related industries see great advantage in the opportunity to verify compatibility with their own strategic choices and to gain inspiration for new product ideas and solutions. As these visitors -which are neither part of buying centres nor potential influencers of a purchasing process - are beyond the scope of the present study, we direct interested readers to other work for greater details (Borghini et al. 2004).

**Table 2 – Compositions of trade shows audience**

Trade Show	% Buyers*	% Atypical visitors	Total Visitor Sample
<i>A) TS dedicated to trade (retailers, wholesalers, exporters, ...)</i>			
Micam 04	77%	23%	101
Mipel 04	78%	22%	103
Momi 04	71%	29%	100
Moda Prima 04	42%	58%	50
Mifur 04	80%	20%	50
Salone del Mobile 04	41%	59%	274
Macef 04	77%	23%	153
<i>On Average</i>	<b>63%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>831</b>
<i>B) TS dedicated to Industrial users</i>			
Xylexpo 04	81%	19%	231
Fluidtrans Compomac 04	95%	5%	100
Sasmil 04	77%	23%	198
Moda In 03	81%	19%	75
<i>On Average</i>	<b>82%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>604</b>

Source: Authors' elaborations on Organizers' data

\* This category includes influencers as well

Also with respect to buyers, quantitative data highlight the clear prevalence of motives not tied to the need to make specific purchases (Table 3). While this motive is well-established in previous literature for atypical visitors, the fact that members of the so-called buying centre are, in most cases, visiting a trade show for reasons others than buying defies conventional wisdom.. In our quantitative sample, only 22-34% of buyers were visiting trade show for, respectively, industrial users and retailers, with the intention

of making purchases within the following few months represents. In our opinion, this may be related to the broadening involvement of organizational departments in purchasing decision processes (e.g., people from R&D, marketing, and so on).

**Table 3 – Main attendance motives for visitors from buying firms\***

Trade shows	Making purchases (%)	Getting informed, knowing the market, seeing novelties (%)	Total Sample**
<i>A) TS dedicated to trade (retailers, wholesalers, importers, ...)</i>			
Micam 04	<b>29%</b>	71%	78
Mipel 04	<b>21%</b>	63%	80
Momi 04	<b>34%</b>	63%	71
Moda Prima 04	52%	43%	21
Mifur 04	<b>32%</b>	68%	40
Salone del Mobile 04	<b>35%</b>	63%	112
Macef 04	<b>44%</b>	54%	118
<i>On Average</i>	<b>34%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>520</b>
<i>B) TS dedicated to Industrial users</i>			
Xylexpo 04	<b>20%</b>	78%	187
Fluidtrans Compomac 04	<b>9%</b>	86%	95
Sasmil 04	<b>16%</b>	75%	152
Moda In 03	67%	31%	61
<i>On Average</i>	<b>22%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>495</b>

Source: Authors' elaborations on Organizers' data

\* Totals do not amount to 100% because other main reasons to visit were omitted

\*\* The sample is made of visitors from buying firms

With regards the determinants and motives to attend events by members of buying centres, our interviews and qualitative data reflect the same results. We have discovered multiple motives which can be summarized in the following categories:

- a) to make a purchase
- b) to find new products or new potential suppliers
- c) to build a bank of information (of products and sellers) for future use rather than to make a purchase decision
- d) to meet known and regular suppliers
- e) to update existing knowledge in order to improve professional skills and credibility
- f) to get "inspirations" for product innovation
- g) to take part in an important event in the industry
- h) to be part of a community of practice
- i) to be reassured by the presence of sellers and other customers

In general, these results reflect findings in the literature (Dudley 1990; Morris 1988; Rothschild 1987, Godar, O'Connor 2001), but do also reveal new knowledge on other and different motives, such as the feeling "to be in the place" itself, to take part in an important event in the sector, to be part of a community of practice, "to be reassured" and so on. As previous literature has provided many contributions on the first two motives, we'll invite the reader to refer to other studies for further explanations (e.g. Godar and O' Connor 2001; Dudley 1990; Bello 1992; Bello and Lothia 1993; Hansen 1996; Munuera and Ruiz 1999); in the following sections we'll focus on the motives related to the ongoing search determinant. The following verbatim of two interviews and our observations depict some of these motives:

"I will come to the fair on all three days [ed. note: the entire duration]. Obviously, this is not true for everybody. It depends on what you want to get out of the show. [...] The main reason I come is to see the new trends. Then I want to contact suppliers. Come here [ed. note: the area dedicated to new trend preview showing]. You see who you like and who you want to get yarns from. And you can see them here or if you can't, make an appointment. [...] To find new suppliers, the fair is certainly more useful than the website. It lets you touch the fabrics and analyse them carefully. Sometimes you can even take a sample, which allows for a more informed choice.

[..] This fair [Pitti Filati] is particularly important for me. I work for a knitwear producer, and the fair is specialised exclusively in knitwear.

The fair is also important because it is a meeting place. In addition to suppliers, you also meet your own competitors I think there is room for everybody. "It's the only place where you can see everybody at the same time. It is important to maintain contact. Yes, this is another reason to go to the fair, in addition to seeing new trends and looking for new suppliers.

[..] The differences with respect to other fairs? Good trend directions, good yarns. If you're in knitwear you have to come to Pitti. Expo also gives the visitor a good indication of the new fashion trends, but Pitti is better from this point of view. You don't see only the Italians you see everybody else, you make contact, there's a lot of different aspects of this business that you can touch in three days. This is the reason."

(buyer for a New York knitwear producer, visiting Pitti Filati)

**Q:** You have been coming to the fair for many years, have you noticed any changes in habits or styles?

**V:** (smiles) the change has been enormous with respect to thirty years ago ... now it is a big thing. In the past, the area for machines was just a section of the fairground, now it's enormous.

**Q:** And in terms of exhibitor and, in particular, visitor objectives?

**V:** Yes, let's say that for those from outside Italy, maybe it is a commercial question for us, we already have the reps who come and see us. So, we come to see machines which we cannot get or do not know, because our representatives do not deal with them, because they come from abroad. You see them at the fair and that is it.

**Q:** Do you come with a fixed idea to visit certain exhibitors or new ones?

**V:** The ones we know invite us to their stands, but normally we come to see if there is some innovation in which we are interested.

**Q:** Irrespective of the exhibitor, that is?

**V:** yes, yes... because the reps of the exhibitors we know already visit us to present their machines here we are looking for innovations, maybe only very small, which may also allow us to save time. Things you do not even think about, because for certain workings you use the machine you know then maybe you come here and find something you had not thought of

**Q:** so the fair offers information and knowledge?

**V:** yes and you also see developments in the industry.

(Italian stair manufacturer, visiting Xylexpo)

Buyers and users visit trade shows for their added value respect to other information sources (i.e., sales reps visits and websites) which is related to the fact of being in the place itself, to build new knowledge that can be potentially useful in the future. The presence of different positions depends on the fact that professional backgrounds have idiosyncratic manners to look at the same stimuli. In the textile-apparel industries, the presence of designers and, generally creative department staff complements the role of buyers. The information gathered are stored for future use.

At the exit of an area where they are showing a video on the new trends I interview with Diego a young girl who works in the creative department of a fashion company in Alba, province of Cuneo. She has just finished taking down a lot of notes on what was shown on the video in the New Trends area. She explains the content of the video, describing the four trends proposed. We ask her if and to what extent it is useful for her work. To summarise information, she even prefers the video to the stands, from a practical point of view. With the video she can take notes, she is more relaxed (*"it is like watching the television at home"*) and can concentrate; all things which are impossible among the crowd of people at the stands. For her, the booths are useful to touch the fabrics.

When we talk about why she comes to the fair she says that in her company there is no longer a clear distinction buyers and creative staff. She has already ordered some time ago before the fair the fabric for the summer collection, so she is not here to place orders. Some of her colleagues in other departments, however, come to the fair now for precisely that reason. The whole company "moves to the fair": staff in the various departments work on shifts and in groups of five or ten go to Moda In.

The designer defines the fairs as important for her profession because, she says, "*fair-notes-report is an automatic process*": the designer goes to the fair, takes notes and writes a written report of what she has seen. This report is useful in choosing models and colours when designing the collection.

(extract from the field notes collected during observations at Moda In )

Ongoing search is thus broad and generalised. It is broad in that it does not concern just a single product or supplier, but a set of suppliers, including the current suppliers, and their relations with the markets. It is generalised in that it is the same for all types of visitor irrespective of the functions in their companies. At capital goods and intermediate product fairs, for example, R&D and production department staff are much more frequently found among the visitors. Their knowledge of the innovations in the sector and their capacity to assess ideas, products and suppliers to create value are considered important skills in companies. From an individual point of view, updating activities are considered an

important means of improving professional skills and may also have personal returns and above all, technological or market knowledge contribute to improving individual reputation. The main contribution comes from continuous contact with other market players which allows to establish valuable professional relations within the respective community of practice. Another reason for attending fairs derives from the search for “inspiration”, i.e. the collection of informational input which could result in potential ideas for future innovation.

An equally important (and at times more important) motivation is the need to pay courtesy visits in order to maintain existing relations with suppliers or to create opportunities for new ties. At first sight, this behaviour can be interpreted as evidence of the relational approach proposed in business marketing literature (Håkansson 1982, Ford et al. 1998). However it is also valuable in the ongoing search perspective. In effect, the relational and social dimension must be considered important in creating a more solid base to build up knowledge of the sector through co-operation between customers and suppliers. The following quotation from interviews represents typical comments we collected in the field:

*“It’s always nice to see a known face... the exhibitors we know invite us for a coffee or even for lunch... we don’t speak much about business here, there will be more time when the sales representative visits us...”*

(Shop owner visiting Pitti Uomo)

As far as the other types of marketing events such as open houses are concerned, there are some similarities, but also some differences in visitor behaviour during fairs. As in this case the visitor cannot compare competing suppliers but only assess the host supplier, development of knowledge of the sector as such is not one of the motives to participate, but rather other objectives in ongoing search. Here elements of professional updating mixed with entertainment are jointly evaluated. Meeting the supplier in a privileged situation in which the social and amusing dimension prevails is fundamental in consolidating existing and new relations in a pleasurable manner. Moreover, it is an opportunity to benefit from training occasions and opportunities and the development of new ideas and insights which suppliers dedicate specifically to their customers.

*“I come to see this supplier’s events every year because I always learn something. You do not only see the new machines, that is obvious. The distinguishing factor is that they always give you new ideas on how we can use the machines we have already bought from them. They give us these new ideas on what the customers in our sector want”.*

(sock manufacturer from Poland attending Santoni and Matec Day)

In general, then, buyers’ motives for attendance to private and collective marketing events are often not linked to or not easily traced back to the need to make a purchase. Rather, the motives appear tied to the need to build up a bank of information for future use as happens in the case of consumer ongoing search (Bloch et al. 1986). What appears to be distinct and different in a business context is the need to maintain relations with suppliers, develop knowledge of the sector in general (which is transferred into individual skills and reputation for expertise), and seek in these skills and relations the anchors to support decisions.

### ***The outcomes of ongoing search processes***

Outcomes generated by visits to trade fairs and private events are generally linked to the motives to attend them.

- ***New knowledge***

As learning is one of the main reason to attend, one of the most frequent outcome of visitors is in term of new knowledge: about products, suppliers, market trends. Some of this knowledge is not even anticipated, or, to use the words of one of our informant: “I don’t know what I’ll learn, but I know that I’ll learn something new”. Another feature of the ongoing search is that visitors cannot promptly assess the practical value of what they learned: “you see a detail, and you forget about it and, perhaps years later, you’ll remember and call the supplier to see if he can help”. In other words, visiting a trade show is, similarly to an insurance, a way to gather knowledge that could be useful in an unforeseen future. To gather this knowledge, visitors do not even need to enter a stand and speak with the booth personnel: while browsing along the

trade fair corridors, visitors take notice of myriads details, often unconsciously, and more than one informant referred to this as an “information overload”. Thus, after a trade show, visitors know more than they can tell.

- *Early information on the evolution of the sector: the role of leaders*  
For most visitors, market leaders are the most important inspirers both in terms of updating regarding the evolution of upstream markets, and in the capacity to understand markets and customer problems. Even if, in truth, the habitual suppliers are the main collaborators and interlocutors during the innovation process, during the information collection phase “*it is, above all, the leading suppliers, not necessarily the habitual suppliers, which present the best innovations. Their presence is fundamental in order to render attendance at the event useful*”. Such is the ability of the leaders to play this role constantly over time, that their absence is interpreted as a shortcoming of the event as a whole. The interviews and direct observations of behaviour reveal that a typical visit to a trade fair starts with the leaders, followed by the habitual suppliers, with whom any innovative ideas obtained from the visit to market leaders are discussed. On the other hand, the time dedicated to new suppliers (unforeseen) is very limited and residual.
- *Establishing and maintaining relationships with suppliers*  
A second important and expected outcome is represented by the social dimensions and implications of the visit. Personal interaction is valuable in order to reduce social distance and develop new knowledge especially when there is the possibility to talk with staff from different departments of the supplier. In most cases, buyers’ only contact with their suppliers consist of the sales reps’ visits: trade fairs and open house event represents an opportunity to meet the suppliers’ entrepreneurs, marketing and sales managers, technical staff. With a brief conversation, problems that have lasted for months if not years may be promptly solved. A face may be associated to voices often heard at the telephone. Old acquaintances are met again and social ties renewed.
- *Reassurance from sellers*  
Considering together the last two types of outcomes, another category of important output of the visit emerges: the possibility to be reassured about previous decisions and directions taken while choosing one supplier and its products. As claimed by the visitors themselves, they go to the fair more to obtain confirmation from their current suppliers (Godar and O’Connor 2001) and of their abilities than to choose new partners. Source loyalty, which is usually strong in business markets (Morris and Holman 1988), does not, however, reduce comparison between different alternatives. Indeed, the buyers interviewed agreed that the presence of their suppliers at the main events is indicative of up-to-date skills and an ability to “stay in the market” (on this topic, see also Blythe 2002). Personal interactions at trade shows usually allow comparisons and interesting discussions about what can be seen during the trade show.
- *Reassurance from other customers*  
For some visitors, the presence of other customers and the possibility to talk or at least to observe their behaviour is of great value as it provides an important term of comparison. Seeing what they order or how they evaluate new products is useful in order to be reassured on their own decisions.
- *Sense of “communitas” and perpetuation of communities of practice*  
The presence of other customers and the staff of suppliers who belong to the same community of practice create “communitas” among visitors, i.e. the sense of belonging to a community of people who share the same interests, problems and approaches. Not only personal interactions but just the feeling of “being in the place” at the same time contribute to the creation of these feeling. Acts, gestures, dialogues and any type of behaviours performed during the event are the visible expressions of this shared symbolic/emotional state.
- *Inspiration for product and/or process development*  
With regards content, the early information sought and obtained from the visit concern aspects which go a long way beyond the availability and performance of specific products and the respect price/cost of use. First of all, they regard what many term “inspiration”, i.e. ideas for production innovation and assessment of the overall trends of downstream markets. As

described by an R&D manager, “... *new suppliers are chosen above all when new products are developed, and the idea of a new product and a new supplier often proceed in parallel*”. To use the expression of an informant, the journeys to suppliers and the visits to fairs can be seen as important “*learning expeditions*”. Attendance at the leading trade fairs gives the opportunity to build up a high level of knowledge, because “*overall you have a feeling of a very high skills level among producers and the sense of being in a stimulating environment*”. The innovative ideas and inspirations are proposed and discussed with suppliers (current and new), while the suppliers themselves are in some way assessed in the light of their ability to “*enter into the customers’ new projects*”. These opportunities for innovation are recognised only through the competitive confrontation that the trade fairs create or through the presentation of company own skills and abilities during the Open Houses.

However, from the point of view of the satisfaction derived from the comparison with the visitor expectations, there are cases of light dissatisfaction (or more frequently some discrepancies between expectations and outcomes), above all regarding the informational value of the event or what it offers in general.

Q: “*this morning you told me you were looking for innovations. Did you find anything?*”

S: “No, not at all really [...] that is nothing which particularly struck me, which particularly attracted my attention, no, nothing I would say. Rather flat”.

(influencer visiting Salone del Mobile)

### ***The perceived importance of living a direct experience during the information search***

During marketing events, buyers are “immersed” in an experience that entails all their senses, where they can touch, smell, listen to, and even taste all the stimuli in the environment, which are mostly provided by their suppliers (Golfetto and Rinallo 2004). Our findings depict a rich set of these experience providers in products, prototypes, product applications, “tacit” knowledge of people, creativity in exhibiting, and many other examples of the supplier’s potential and ability to create value (see Golfetto 2003; Möller and Törrönen 2003).

The activity of early knowledge of a supplier’s potential to create value does not regard so much the use which could be made of the product, as the result that this product, within a production process together with the supplier’s know-how, could generate for the purchasing company. This perspective implies, above all, the assessment of the “tacit” capacity of the supplier to address the customer’s production and market problems, both with regards the current processes, and in terms of the contribution to innovation and early information on problems in downstream markets (on this topic, see also Möller and Torronen 2003, Borghini et al. 2003). As stated by some buyers “*on the market, the products are apparently all the same, but since you cannot change supplier every day, the problem is to find out what is behind the products, and whether the supplier can work well with us. The problem is to have a supplier which respects quality levels and delivery times, offers acceptable support services, is technologically up-to-date, contributes to problem-solving, knows our market and helps us in innovation.*” In turn, the assessment of the value of a supplier is a process based on sensitivities and abilities which are difficult to codify, as they are based on feelings and intuitions derived from an analysis of the supplier’s communication.

According to the interviewees, what renders experience with live communication more meaningful is the opportunity to “touch the products”, “to speak to the people”, “to look each other in the eyes”. Furthermore, there are elements which make it possible to “test directly” a supplier’s capacity, and which can be compared with the *experience providers* indicated by Schmitt (1999) in the literature on experiential marketing towards consumers (Holbrook and Hirschmann 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1998, 1999). Briefly, these experience providers emerged in the research are as follows:

- *suppliers’ products and prototypes*: products are by far the element of communication which is most appreciated. Visitors have access to this source of information in different ways depending on the type of event. In general, the products presented at trade fairs are only the best ones (used to “show off” skills) or those representing the most recent innovations. At private events, on the other hand, the whole range of the product mix (or a significant part) can be examined. The most recent innovations are often only accessible at the private events, in order to reduce the risk of imitation. At the trade fairs, “confidentiality” is more difficult to defend. The product is,

nevertheless, attractive, because the possibility “to touch it” allows experienced buyers (e.g. those with a technical background) to understand better the implications on their own production process. This factor is so important, that most respondents could not even imagine attending an event where the product was not present. The product is considered to be the best (if not complete) representation of the supplier’s ability. Some visitors in the capital goods sectors even ask in advance to exhibitors which products will be shown and consequently decide whether to visit the stand or the event. Recently, it has become common among many exhibitors to show examples of prototypes or products which could be obtained by using their machines or products (e.g. garments which can be made with the company’s fabric or yarns). It is above all this type of presentation which attracts most interest among buyers, because through such presentations they can read the supplier’s specialist skills. Allowing buyers to take away samples or prototypes, so bringing a part of their experience back into the company, is particularly appreciated (Picture 1). The overload of the senses which is typical of these situations, in which there are numerous stimuli and little possibility to filter them, means that samples, prototypes and the accompanying documentation function as artefacts able to re-evolve the experience and share it more easily with colleagues who had not been present at the event.

**Picture 1 – Collect product samples**



- *Human resources and opportunities to establish relations.* Many buyers believe that marketing events as live communication events (especially collective ones) constitute a “neutral” environment in which customers can interact with supplier employees who are not only sales staff or distributors. According to the buyers, the opportunity to speak to the supplier’s technical personnel is in itself a good return on the investment to visit the supplier. Particular praise was given to a large Japanese machine producer which during the main European fairs transfers R&D staff from the parent company to meet visitors. This commitment of resources transmits the idea of the company’s innovation and problem solving capacity, but also allows the feedback of information and solutions to particular problems from customers. Even during promotional events, customers wish, above all, to speak to the technical staff who design products or machines. An accidental consequence in communication events is that these contacts between suppliers’ and customers’ technicians result in “communities of practice” which allow all involved to get ideas for innovation, to discuss common problems, obtain solutions, exchange favours and, above all, exchange (generally tacit) knowledge. Finally, the cultural and convivial opportunities offered by the suppliers are also much appreciated as part of a business relation. According to the interviews, such occasions generally “create a sense of familiarity with the supplier’s staff which helps to establish friendly relations, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and overcoming relational problems that may have emerged over time”.
- *Sharing experiences and socialising with other buyers.* The presence of other buyers during a meeting with a supplier is considered stimulating by customers. For example, an textile trade show organizer’s idea to place facilities for relaxation close to the research area (a space in which the organiser summarises the main trends for the season) was much appreciated, because it

allowed visiting designers in particular to meet each other casually and discuss new trends (product innovations, but also management changes, strategies, fears about competition from emerging countries, gossip). In the same way, technical seminars which some companies regularly hold for their customers regarding important aspects of technological progress are also appreciated because people can discuss and compare technical problems (i.e., of the communities of practice), going beyond issues of competition. Buyers have said that in many cases these meetings have led to the start of important “competitive collaboration” or have helped “to not feel alone with problems”. In some cases, the meetings with competitors even become more important than the content of the seminar or the meeting with the supplier. Finally, suppliers who promote such opportunities are seen positively because “they do something for us showing that they are open to and interested in our problems”. In addition to the supplier's staff, then, the opportunities to meet offered by the live communication events can produce horizontal communities of practice between specialists from different functions. People with specific positions within companies (designers, researchers, technicians, buyers) can meet colleagues from other companies and establish contacts and relations which, ultimately, enhance professional expertise and resolve common problems, including assessment of suppliers.

### ***The rituality of behavioural patterns***

Trade fairs are recurring events, held with a frequency linked to the length of the innovation cycle in their underlying markets, i.e., biannual in the textile-apparel industry, annual in most other, biennial or even quadrennial in the case of capital goods (Golfetto 2004). Habitual visitor behavioural patterns, edition after edition, show remarkable similarities in term of paths within the fairgrounds, stands visited, people talked to, and so on. The observations of behaviour during the visit, the atmosphere generated and the analysis of the emotions felt by the people involved allow us to see trade fairs and open houses as ideal contexts in which to perpetuate ritualistic behaviours that elsewhere have been identified as important patterns in industrial contexts (Cova and Salle, 2000).

Business marketing literature has for some time suggested that in inter-company relations there is a reciprocal interest between the parties (Ford, Håkansson et Johanson 1986) to create over time an atmosphere which favours the continuation of the relation (Hallén and Sandström 1991). Indeed, this relation constitutes an emotional framework which favours and sustains exchange and collaboration between partners. According to the classification of rituals proposed in literature of anthropology (Van Gennep 1909, Goffman 1969) and adapted to marketing by Cova e Salle (2000), the rituals seen during marketing events belong to the category of rituals of integration or macro-rituals. The term refers to those rituals based on the activation of formal procedures and ceremonies to mark and render solemn membership of a given community. These acts have a “sacred”, immanent significance compared to their functional value in a strict sense.

Visitors (obviously, together with the exhibitors) attribute values to the events which go beyond the provision of information. The direct observations of effective behaviour reveal all the typical characteristics of a ritual (Rook, 1985):

- episodic string of events
- linkage of the episodic event strings in a fixed sequence
- repetition of sequence over time
- existence of a dramatic scripting

Year after year, visitors and exhibitors put on the same show, just changing some of the content (products exhibited or other details of communication). The event calendar is fixed, and behaviours, in terms of receiving a visit, on the one hand, and paying a visit on the other, are repeated perpetually without any important changes.

Visitors, in particular, tend to follow the same order in the path they take around the event and the time dedicated to the different suppliers:

1. research area and presentation of new trends (when present)
2. sector leaders
3. habitual suppliers
4. other exhibitors

As one visitor said:

*"We have to be here. And you always expect to meet the others. Coming here is a fixed thing."*  
(visitor at Pitti Filati)

The repetition of actions during the event and the symbolic value attributed to them (essentially the reduction of cognitive dissonance and the construction of a shared, collective identity, particularly in the difficult times of recession in the industry) mean that these actions can be interpreted as “cyclical” or “calendar” rituals. The fixed timing of the event re-enforces the importance of the repetition and the value of belonging to the community which takes part.

According to the model proposed by Cova e Salle (2000), different levels of socialisation can also be identified in these ritual contexts (Table 4).

**Table 4 – Socialization and ritualization during marketing events**

	<b>Dyads (buyer/seller)</b>	<b>Tribes (selected network of partners: customers and suppliers)</b>	<b>Circles (whole community of visitors and exhibitors)</b>
<b>Initiation rituals</b>	Occasional during trade shows or open houses		
<b>Calendar rituals</b>	Typical of trade shows		
<b>Cyclical rituals</b>	Existing customers with regular suppliers		
<b>Occasional rituals</b>		Typical of open houses	

Source: adapted from Cova and Salle (2000)

The symbolic value of these rituals which emerges from the empirical research suggests a second type of interpretation which leads us to consider these events as “liminal” spaces (Van Gennep 1909, Turner 1974), unlike the way in which it has been previously interpreted in the literature both in business (Rosson and Seringhaus 1995) and consumer (Sherry et al. 2001) contexts.

The concept of liminality introduced by Van Gennep (1909) identifies a particular condition linked to rituals. It marks the moment when an individual passes from one social condition to another, and also involves, in addition to the individual performing the ritual, other subjects.<sup>3</sup> The public celebration gives a sacredness to the “passage” and confirms the collective recognition of the newly acquired social position.

In Turner's interpretation (1974), liminality is a passage during the crises and break-ups of communities which he defines “social drama”. Under liminal conditions, social systems can be re-built by collective actions which reflect on the behaviour of individual subjects. It is, therefore, a moment of change which leads to the transformation of the existing social and symbolical structures. This change occurs by freely and, at times, playfully combining and re-combining these structures. The change initiated by a crisis occurs or is blocked by a ritual. The resettling of the entire social system is also achieved with a ceremony which Turner interprets as a theatrical performance in which the players also act for the audience. Not only do they act, but they make an effort to show the others what they are doing and have done.

Particularly during times of crisis, trade fairs can constitute this liminal space where a performance is presented in which the group is important, a collective rather than individual act. Fairs have value and a sense because many players are present, because of the repetition of ritual which gives a confirmatory and sacred value to the event. The uncommon spectacle of the event re-evokes the value of the playful dimension that is typical of this passage. In the moments of crisis (economic difficulties in the sector, uncertainties regarding future progress, technological developments and trends in consumption), the theatrical performance marks the passage from the existing situation (period prior to the fair when each company experiences individually the situation of uncertainty) to the following state (a new system of knowledge and perceptions shared between competitors and partners). The simultaneous presence of many different players in a provisional but important state for the industry germinates actions and behaviours which re-define in their complexity the dynamics of the industry, the state of knowledge and

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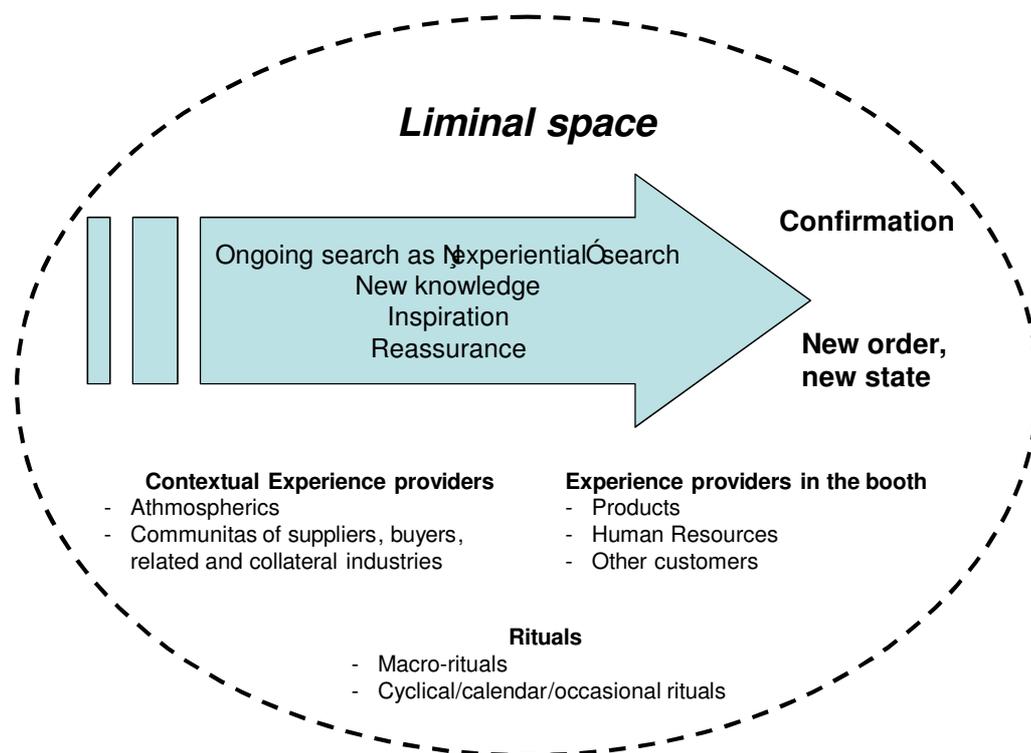
<sup>3</sup> The latin term *limen/limes* means threshold or transversal boundary and it has been used in psychology to define a phenomenon which is at the threshold level of conscience and perception).

the competitive positions. The products exhibited, the communication policies, and visit behaviours are nothing but the concrete manifestation of the elements of the ritual (Rook 1985), which make the event significant more from a symbolic than a factual point of view.

## Emerging theoretical framework and managerial implications

At this point, we have all the elements to present a theoretical reference framework grounded on the interpretation of research findings. Combining the behavioural results with the use and cognitive value of the experience providers, we propose the following interpretative model which integrates all the concepts found in the empirical research (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Ongoing search during marketing events in the experiential and liminal perspective**



The figure highlights how the process of information search at trade fairs and marketing events in general is seen positively from an experiential standpoint (Schmitt 1999; Holbrook and Hirschmann 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1998, 1999) as only this can maximise the outcome of the process. The process involves the use of experience providers able to confer this cognitive value to sight. We can identify two different types of experience providers: the ones coming from a single suppliers communication efforts and the ones deriving from the context such as the contemporary presence of many different actors of the industry, the atmosphere of the event and so on. The repetition of rituals and the elevated symbolic/emotional value attributed to the time of the meeting makes the event a representation which shows, collectively, the passage from a present to a future situation, constructing at the same time a radical change or the confirmation of an existing order.

The managerial implications of the model are clear: a "good" trade fairs is co-created by both trade fair organizers and exhibitors. Organizers have the important role of staging the atmospheric of the contextual experience. It is worth noting that trade fair literature is has so far neglected the macro-level role of organizers in creating the context enabling individual exhibitors and visitors to make the most of their participation. Our results show for example that the presence of market leaders is of paramount importance if the trade fair has to fulfil its role in providing inspiration to visitors; that trends areas are of similar, paramount importance in obtaining the most from the visit; that "socialization" areas that enable visitors to interact and share knowledge among themselves are also an important ingredient for a successful trade fair. From a different perspective, organizers are also responsible to some extent for

the “casting” of the participants to the event. If *communitas* is a desired outcome, participants are to be selected on the basis of their role under this point of view. For example, professional visitors at the Salone del Mobile (i.e., architects and furniture retailers) were dissatisfied by the presence of consumers that, to some extent, spoiled their experience, because of the more crowded environment and competition for exhibitors’ attention. In other trade fairs, the presence of foreign exhibitors (e.g., Asian) is appreciated by visitors but less so by domestic exhibitors, which feel threatened “in their own place” by the forces of globalization, disturbing the proper establishing of *communitas*.

The individual exhibitor, within the context created by the organizer, may employ appropriate experience providers to stage micro-rituals of hospitality and affective integration among customer (or prospect) and its personnel, in order to re-actualize (or possibly start) relationships. This is true also in the context of individual events: conceiving them as rituals permits to highlight the dual reasons visitors have for participating: not only to deepen their relationship with suppliers, but also to establish personal and/or professional relationships with members of their occupational community working for different employers.

From a different perspective, our model also provides guidance regarding the selection of trade fairs and measuring returns on trade fair investments. First, our results show the difficulties in establishing a causal relationships between trade fair investments and measurable returns. Unlike trade fairs held in emerging markets, those taking place in penetrated markets do not generate significant leads, to the extent that some companies question their effectiveness on the basis of the models prevailing in the academic literature. Yet, these trade fairs have a role to fulfil: maintaining relationships, rather than creating new ones, by re-actualizing social ties and by reducing customers’ cognitive dissonance. Moreover, when considering that visitors are engaged in an ongoing search, the temporal horizon of the return on trade fair investments will inexorably be long, and short-sighted exhibitors could loose some opportunities...

## Conclusions

The study presented in this article has highlighted how the pre-purchase information search and assessment process by industrial buyers (understood as members of a purchasing centre) is, in effect, a path of continual learning which is often not linked to specific purchasing objectives and which can be termed experiential learning. It is mainly realised through “physical” contact with products, relational experiences with other companies, assessments of tacit competence, or contact with stimulating and inspirational environments in which personal emotions are inextricably mixed and often support professional objectives. Under the incessant pressure of competition and the evolution of technology, industrial buyers undertake complex and continuous early information activities which do not involve merely a codifiable “product-price-supplier” analysis, as the simplification of marketing manuals would have us believe, but collect, above all, non-codifiable knowledge, such as ideas, inspiration for innovation, comparisons of technological advances, sharing prospects with suppliers, customers and competitors.

This process is centred on suppliers, but precisely because it is not limited to the latter, privileges collective events, in which the stimuli (and often the reassurances) come from the overall atmosphere and the simultaneous presence of other buyers/competitors and not just from the individual suppliers. These events clearly reveal the “physical-experiential” search paths of potential buyers (focus on leaders, touching the products, speaking with technical staff, observing the behaviour of buyers-competitors [Borghini et al. 2004]), paths which in theory are conceived as abstract-cognitive processes, but which the buyers themselves spontaneously define as “learning expeditions”, as they involve both senses and contact. It is also curious to note that while marketing theory calls the entire search-purchase-use-repurchase process a “learning process” (Lambin 1996), here we are talking of experiential learning already in the first stage. This is not, however, so strange, if we remember that in business-to-business contexts a purchase primarily signifies a choice/confirmation of a relation with a supplier which must continue over time, which supports the customer’s skills and which is often decisive in the success of the customer’s activity (Golfetto et al. 2004, Golfetto and Mazursky 2004).

For the business buyer, the experiential component thus involves the utilisation of emotions, sensations, and intuitions as functional tools in activating and giving sense to complex information and phenomena which contribute to the professional success of the individual and the company. It also involves the

acquisition of reassurances regarding the personal needs of belonging and socialisation, in exactly the same way as with consumers.

From a theoretical point of view, the study contributes to the existing literature from various points of view. First, it integrates previous work on information search, highlighting the continuative and experiential nature of this process. Second, it provides empirical evidence for the theoretical proposal to extend the concepts of experiential marketing to industrial markets (Golfetto and Rinallo 2004). This work is thus presented as a contribution to the cross-fertilisation between knowledge developed in business and consumer marketing, in the direction recently proposed by Cova and Salle (2003).

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