

Defining a network by common brand: the ACTA project.

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to show how network based on a common brand could be a different way for not industrial small firms to open their markets and develop their business in an hypercompetitive context. To reach its aim the paper use both brand literature and network studies, finding an empirical case of study in the Acta project financed by the Italian 'Attività Produttive' Ministry and still active in most of the Italian participant areas.

Reviewing the literature is clear that the brand is a unique marketing tool to defend a success product, especially when market competition is high and imitator actions are aggressive. Traditionally a brand is used from a firm or for one of its products and identifies the value of the thing or service and the producer – production image. Nowadays the brand can be used in another way, from firm groups that have common market interests or from different operators that have to defend a valued common product in open markets like ours.

This way of using the brand and the related politics can be also improved, designing a trademark for different artefacts that have only a common original country of production, but different manufacturing systems and traditions. Studying this new brand for Italian traditional ceramics and supporting it all over the world by common promotion actions was the way chosen by 'Polo Ceramico di Faenza' to realize a network that can guarantee specific manufacturing characteristics based on tradition and standardization of advertising and selling strategy by web.

In fact, Italian panorama of ceramic production is really rich in forms, colours and fabrication systems so its protection is a must: actually those characters represent the object true value and the unique part of it that can't be copied and enhances its value during the years. So differences in Italian ceramics production, strictly linked with the manufacturing locations, are important to defend, as the image, considered all together, of the 'Italian Traditional Ceramics', a sector that each year, during the past five, has lost quickly in competitiveness, laboratory number and occupation given.

In order to contest this negative trend the 'Polo Ceramico di Faenza' has studied an unique brand and a standardised promotion politic, defining a new type of network, able to protect artefacts differences.

The first step to reach this aim was designing a brand composed of two parts: the first, universal for Italy and the second, 'special' for each area of manufacturing, indicating the fabrication location origin of the object. Each operator can apply to have the opportunity of using this 'common brand' for its objects and a public inventory has been created to register the 'branded objects' so their value can be certified.

The second step was to establish different rules for fabrication, materials and colours used etc, for each area of production that firms have to respect to obtain the use of the 'common brand' witch is a guaranty of quality and distinctive value of the item.

This two steps were necessary to create an unique image of the 'Italian Traditional Ceramics' production, promoted through the entire country by a net of 33 bureau located in each area of major ceramics production and working together to build and maintaining a common promotion strategy and a web site to sponsor and sell Italian artefacts all over the world with a standardized action.

Studying the Acta project is clear that this type of 'soft network' could be replicated for 'made in Italy' not standardized products that couldn't reach international markets by themselves because of their dimension, financial resources etc.

Keywords: Strategic networks, brand, hypercompetition, international market, business development.

Introduction

Nowadays economic markets are very different from the ones studied in the past, as well as consumer characteristics and behaviours. To identify these new market properties D'Aveni (1994) create the 'hypercompetition' concept, a different way firms use to compete where rapidity, aggressiveness and the sequence of moves and countermoves play a major role in determining the organization success. Perrone (1996) identifies in globalization and technology the two hypercompetition engines that allow a faster circulation of information and diffusion all over the world. This radically changed concurrence rules and also people behaviours in consumption preferences. At the same time a lot of other elements changed as the product and brand relationship that has overturned. Products and material elements of the competition seems not to be as important as in the past and not tangible assets appear to be even more responsible for firms survival and success. Between them brand is the element that makes possible the product existence and functioning inside the communication frame precisely created for it (Codeluppi 2000). But this frame focused on brand is difficult to realize for small firms, especially if they are artefact based and without any specific knowledge of branding and international market competition. In this scenario it's important to find these knowledge outside the firm, using other organizations prepared to successfully manage this new concurrence way, without losing economic and legal independency, and this can be reached only through firms networks. The 'Acta project' considers all the elements above and create an organizational network based on a common brand, specifically build to promote Italian traditional ceramic artefacts, also considering the quality problem of different types, forms, traditions and localizations productions, creating a broker structure to support the net.

Considering all the hypercompetitive literature and consumption behaviours evolution studies as known, we will consider basic brand features and some network issues strictly necessary to understand the 'Acta project'. It will be examined as the last step of our analysis; furthermore it can be considered as a promising answer to help Italian artefacts firms in order to become international, maintaining their identity.

Brand features

Brand can be defined as a "name, term, insignia, symbol, drawing or combination of the above that sought to identify a producer's, or producers', goods or services and distinguish them from the competition (American Marketing Association)". This definition focus on the *identification function* owned by a brand, which is very important in markets with product scarcity, but rare in nowadays economic situation (Brondoni 2000/2001). When markets are hypercompetitive (D'Aveni 1994), as today, there are a lot of concurrent firms that are merely imitators and that want to confuse consumers to shift preferences on their product using similar leader brand name. So brands has to reinforce product icon by awareness and image to maintain consumer segments acquired. In this case brand can be understand as "a specific relationship created within a given market for the promotion of a particular product", so relationship established by brand makes possible the "product or service recognition" (Brondoni 2000/2001). Considering this different way to define brand it's possible to recognize a brand as "a sum of assets allocated by an enterprise to the competitive market process and, particularly, the investments dedicated to develop knowledge of and relationship with the market (Brondoni 2000/2001)". So consumers have some product expectations that firm has the responsibility to maintain. As stated by Brondoni and De Gregorio (1996) the firm responsibility system can be read from a producer's point of view in some obligations like consistency, continuity and socio-cultural features that respectively generate assets like credibility, legitimacy and linking¹. So brand has a totally intangible nature and considers not only responsibilities and expectations but also market 'feels and believes' associated with the offered product (Codeluppi 1997). In another way brand can be understood as "constituted by discourses set around it from all subjects, individuals or collective, involved in its generation (Semprini 1993)". So a firm has to understand which are the fundamental elements constituting a brand to better manage it and the related policies to realize organization ends.

Three are the factors on which is important to focus our attention: brand identity, brand image and brand equity.

¹ For more details see Brondoni and De Gregorio (1996) and Brondoni (2000/2001).

Aacker and Joachimsthaler (2001) define brand identity as a set of connotative brand factors which have to be built and defended by whom has the responsibility to make the strategies. In other words, it's what brand would like to be, it reflects ethos, objectives and values that makes brand structure different from competitor ones (Louro and Cunha 2001). It's the brand incarnation, its figure and presence (Fabris and Minestrone 2004) and its generation is due to a symbol stratification, a value set, an attitude and meaning build around it. Brand identity must be assembled over time and be coherent with firm culture, values and image because brand will guide positioning activity and all related actions. Brand identity has to help building a durable relationship with consumers, generating a certain amount of value that, potentially at least, brings functional, emotional and auto-expression benefits (Aacker and Joachimsthaler 2001). To better understand brand identity marketing studios have proposed different frames as the Aacker and Joachimsthaler (2001) one shoed below:

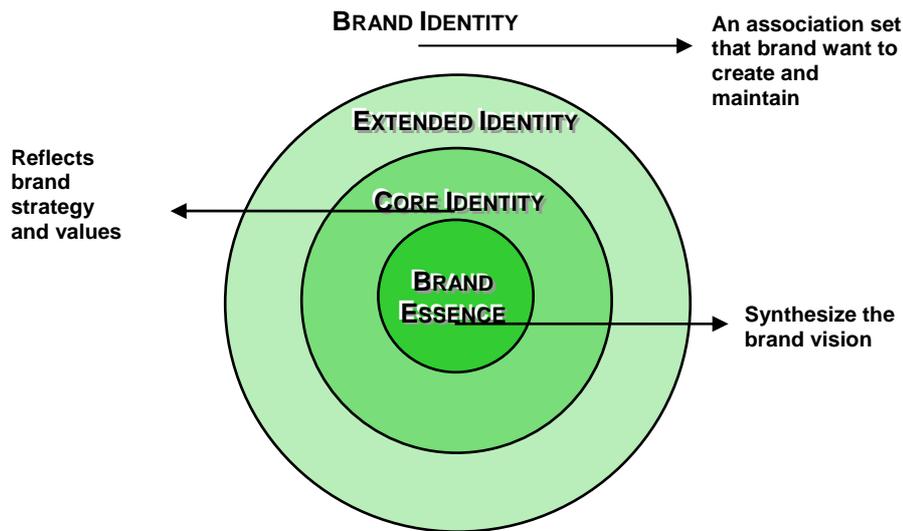


Figure 1: Aaker e Joachmsthaler (2001) brand identity representation (adapted from).

The brand essence it's the true brand soul, it's the best explanation of why brand exists. The core identity is the connotative elements representation of the brand, and reflects organizational strategy and values, it's normally created using from two to four dimensions that have not to be changed also in brand extension policies. The extended identity includes all elements excluded from precedent definitions and can help giving some ideas or useful models to develop the brand identity, so includes symbols and personality.

The brand image is the actual connotation of the brand as stated by Aaker e Joachmsthaler (2001), so it's the perceived picture in customer's mind, from a receiving point of view. It represents the "central nucleus of the brand system (Lombardi 2003)" and it's the direct contact point with the customer world. The brand image definition differs from one author to another, but Keller's one appears the most interesting between them. Keller (1993) defines the brand image as the association set linked to the brand in the consumer memory. Assuming associations as knots, Keller (1993) states that these are connected to brand knot, and thanks to information inside them, they built all together the meaning brand assumes from customer point of view. Studying different types of brand associations existing in consumer memory, Keller describes the most important elements to build the correct image in customer mind. These are offering attributes, customer perceived benefits and attitudes consumer has matured in its consumption experiences of the brand. Attributes are qualities the customer ascribes to branded goods or services ed effects expected by its buying. Benefits are defined by Keller as the advantages the product can give. Attitude is considered as the total judgement the consumer has of the brand, it often furnish the central motivation to choose a product.

The creation and evaluation of brand equity it's the base for brand strategic management. This evaluation is not easy at all, above all because brand is an intangible asset and so there are different way studied to measure its equity, but with different results, sometimes very diverse from each other. At the same time a lot of different definitions have been given for brand equity focused on two concepts. As stated by Keller (1993) the first one has a financial implication and comes from the

necessity to estimate as more precisely as possible the brand value for book-keeping, fusion or selling purposes; the second reason that motivate managers in calculating brand equity is to apply particular strategies to increase marketing productivity. We choose one of these approaches, considered particularly interesting for the paper ends, the Aaker (1997) one showed below².

Aaker stated that brand generate value and the value added created raises or lowers depending on marketing decisions or others events that can strength or damage the brand. By this way Aaker (1997) defines the brand equity as a value based upon an activity and passivity sequence associated to it, to its name or logo, that adds or subtracts value to product or service sold by a firm and acquired by a consumer. From Aaker point of view activities and passivity that has to be considered are five: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other resources especially related to brand.

The first element, brand loyalty, can be represented as below:

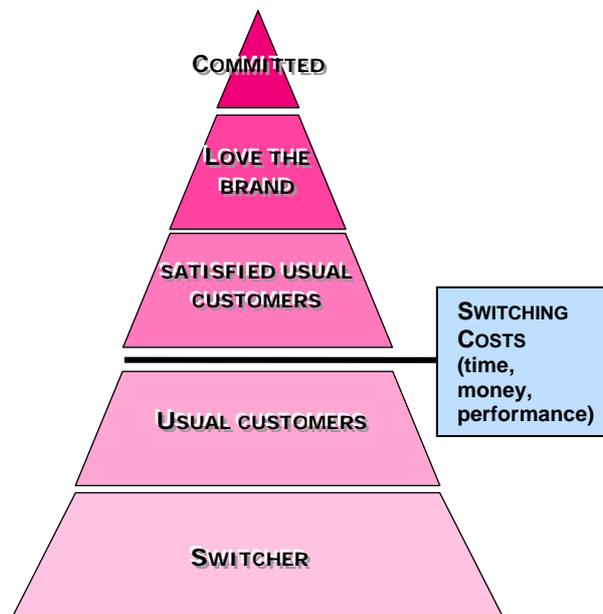


Figure 2: Brand loyalty modelling (source: adapted from Aaker 1997).

Aaker (1997) views brand loyalty as a central aspect of marketing activities and defines it as the attachment measure experienced by consumer in brand respect. So it shows the preference customer give to the specific brand but also the probability of a different choice the consumer can do by consequence to prices or characteristics variations. Brand loyalty directly impacts on selling level, so committed customers are the ones that assure an higher selling level, and switchers are the ones that change preferences only following an opportunistic way of choosing. The switching costs line identifies cost level a customer has to sustain in terms of money, time, resources and energies to be loyal to a brand. The more they are, the less is the consumer number ready to sacrifice themselves.

Brand awareness can be understood as a potential consumer ability to recognize or remind the brand as belonging of a specific product class, establishing, by this way, a tie between brand and product class (Aaker 1997). Brand awareness is important in the buying consumer process because customer has always a favourable attitude for known things respecting to the unknown ones. Aaker identifies five different notoriety levels (see figure 3 below) pointing to the brand capacity to be reminded, which is very important also for the second (unaided recall) and third level of the pyramid (aided recall). For example, unaided recalls are central in routine and impulse buying where these brands often directly enter in the consideration set.

² Another very useful approach is the Keller (1993) one also used in more recent studies as Busacca (2000).

Perceived quality, the third element in the brand equity frame, can be defined as the consumer perception of the global quality or of the good or service superiority for the use it has been created, identified by the brand among other alternatives (Aaker 1997). It can also be viewed as the expectation sum of the customer in the respect of a brand, because each element contributes to over all perceived quality. This dimension can be measured by customer satisfaction and this helps to determine the value proposition and by this way the brand positioning.

Brand associations is everything which can be tied to the brand in the consumer mind (Aaker 1997) so through an indirect method Aaker considers in this scenario the draw interpretation, the brand as a person, an animal, an activity, a review, and so on ending with free associations³.

The last element of brand equity modelling is represented by other brand exclusive resources as, for example, patents, copyright, privileged distributive channels, etc. Their value depend both on the ability to prevent or to protect the brand from aggressive competition actions and on their capability to strength the brand loyalty.



Figure 3: Brand awareness modelling (source: adapted from Aaker 1997)

The brand elements described above, using Aaker frame, help us to understand the management major role played at the very first moment of the brand creation. In fact, the relationship build by a brand “leads us to consider it as a time-limited result of the *responsibility system* achieved by a company through the application of certain obligations aimed at developing specific resources” as stated by Brondoni (2000/2001). Moreover, “in relation to demand, brand embodies the level of perception (awareness) and type of acceptance (image) of a product in respect to the competition” and by this way it’s able to satisfy expectations coming from companies, competitors, customers and environmental factors that Brondoni (2000/2001) defines as ‘noises’. But at the very beginning of its life, at the market launch time, no specific relationship exists with a defined market. It emerges during its market contact, that, in some way, selects distinctive relationship factors that become specific and fixed, reducing flexibility and freedom. In other words, as Brondoni (2000/2001) states, “the brand relationship begins to define itself”. So brand-building started from a precise identity definition based upon product distinctive characteristic and becomes successful depending on different elements as product particularities, “evocative effectiveness” of brand or corporate name, a “product’s geographic and historic roots and advertising messages, etc.” (Brondoni 2000/2001). But the first element to set brand identity profile objective is brand perception of the market, even if reaching a defined brand perception necessitate “precise definitions of brand identity should be and the actions that contribute to achieving that identity” (Brondoni 2000/2001) as showed in the Kapferer (1997) frame below.

³ For more details about this subject see Aaker (1997) from p. 182.

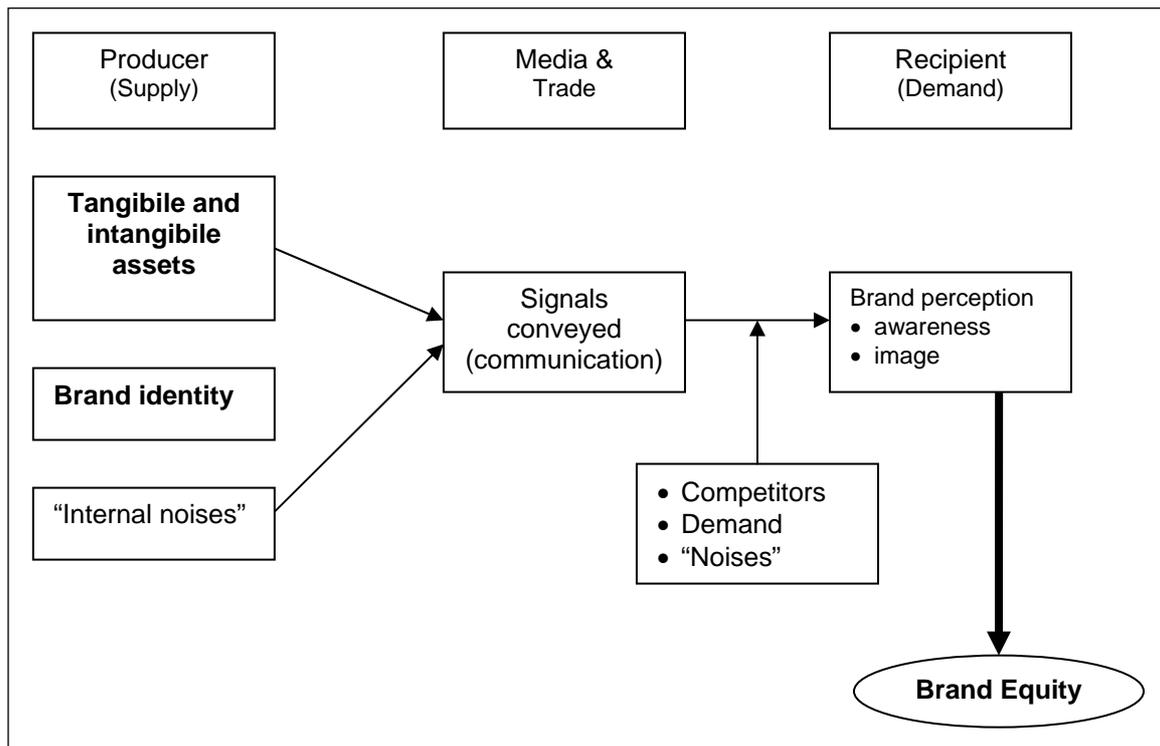


Figure 4: Brand identity, perception and equity (source: adapted from Kapferer 1997)

Brand-building process it's not exhaustive to create brand identity because it can be partially changed thanks to brand perception customers experiment. In other words, the firm can plan the brand identity and all implementation programs to maintaining it, but results can be different from expected due to consumer brand perception and this is also the reason of brand policies birth⁴. Between supply and demand sides, as shown above (figure 4), it's important to consider communication policies and particularly signals emitted by media, trade and finance providers that can influence positively or negatively the customer brand perception and by this way the brand equity that Kapferer (1997) view as "the state at the moment *t*", of the relationship between a defined offering and a given market", yet analysed thanks to Aaker frame.

What is important to point out from the paper it's that in highly competitive markets as nowadays ones, "high brand equity represents a positive differential that ensures a certain stability in a company's product strategies over time", so products can be reinvented without losing the build credibility, legitimacy and affection and with a "simplification of information processing, greater confidence in product selection and as brand satisfaction" (Brondoni 2000/2001). To reach this aim from a firm network point of view is necessary to standardize products quality which is difficult when we talk about artefacts realized all over Italy following different traditions, way of production, colours, materials and techniques. For this reason one of the central steps that Aicc (Associazione italiana dei Comuni di antica tradizione Ceramica – Italian Association of traditional ceramic artefact municipalities) did is to push municipalities to create a distinctive disciplinary book in which are described all the rules artisans had to respect to put on their artefacts the common brand. But to protect brand image and perception of the brand, 'Acta project' stated this as a first step to put the common brand on artefacts. In fact, the Acta brand can be applied to single products that have passed a rigorous selection by a specific municipality and artisans experts commission that check the conformity of each characteristic to established rules and, if all are well respected, add the object in the public inventory especially set up in the CCIAA (Camera di Commercio, Industria, Artigianato, Agricoltura – Italian Chamber of Commerce) district bureaus, assuring, by this way, customers and other economic operators interested in this subject. It's true that by this way products coming from different municipalities and registered in different public inventories are totally different from one another, but the respect of

⁴ Also other external factors can influence brand profile as competing companies, end-user demand and noises as stated by Brondoni (2000/2001 pag. 9).

tradition, which is the base of artefact quality and value is ensured by the commission and help to create common communication policies otherwise not possible. To add value and to preserve good municipality ceramic equity, deriving from ceramic production sites yet well known in an international context, the trademark has been realized joining two parts: the first is the common one, which logo has been especially studied and realized and the second below send back to the origin municipality using its name. This way to build the common brand also assure the potential consumer not to be confused on production type and traditions followed to realize the object, but also put it in a wide scenario of Made in Italy artefacts that strengths its image and make possible its communication all over the world.

Considering all elements above is possible to recognize in the 'Acta project' the decision to bet on a range-brand policy "which refers to a group of products that together make the same claims (Brondoni 2000/2001)". "We are talking about a series of offerings that come together to form a specific relationship. Individual goods can therefore be given a name that comes from their product class and that allows them to be identified" as stated by Brondoni (2000/2001), even if in the studied case the name doesn't come from a product class but from an origin location that allows the exact identification of the artefact characteristic that are published also in the Aicc and Acta web sites. The range-brand policy⁵ has some specific advantages as (Brondoni 2000/2001):

- to be free for creating a specific relationship by the life of the given commodity, useful when life cycles are briefs because brand can support new products realized in between the range-brand policy enabling their quicker consumer adoption;
- sale communication, promotion and advertising synergies, that are very important for small artefact firms that haven't got the necessary financial resources to invest in these activities.

Range-brand policy has also some limits as:

- widening the range, brand can lose some initial appeal and weaken associations that determine customer choice;
- an inferior quality product can negatively influence all brand-range;
- a particularly innovative product cannot find in the range the correct place because of its characteristics too far from the range ones.

Looking at limitations above it's clear that 'Acta project' considers all of them because, even if artefacts differ a lot from one another, brand associations are the same, moreover the product quality is checked by specially nominated commissions that guarantee it, considering the rule book of the particular municipality. Finally particular innovative product are impossible to realize in the common brand range because all materials, colours, production techniques and so on of each artefact are established by the public disciplinary book, limiting the brand usage only at these products and not to all production realized by artisans of the participant municipalities.

Furthermore is important to point out that advantages of the brand-range policy are all used in the 'Acta project' because the created relationship is time lasting and communication and sale actions can be jointly developed by all project participants.

Subjects discussed above will appear clearer after reviewing network literature which is the second support for the studied case, that will be analysed below.

The network studies contribution

Network literature has been used in many studies concerning manufacturing firms, but their application to non industrial sectors are still few specially for artefact production.

Also in this context it's true that "action and decision behaviour reasons of every economic subject, individual or organization doesn't matter, are not only the result of elements or internal processes but are to be found in the relationship that each actor has with the others (Soda 1998)". The reason of this argumentation can be found in two propositions that are the basis of the modern network theory (Soda 1998):

1. the relationship that an organizational subject has with the environment can condition or determine, to some extent in a not conscious way, an obligation network that modify its behaviours and decisions (Bott 1957);

⁵ Brondoni distinguishes between three different policies: product-brand, range-brand and umbrella-brand one. For more details see Brondoni 2000/2001.

2. relationships are a resource that economic operators can utilize and manipulate to have benefits (Burt 1992).

These relationships are important to survive, to grow, to innovate, to compete in a better way, so they play a major role in nowadays hypercompetitive context, above all for small firms without the necessary strength to compete alone globally. Relationships or connections can also create a network⁶ that for firms can be viewed as a concrete organizational solution with some distinctive characteristics between the 'traditional' two: enterprise and market (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994).

Firm network can be recognized because of enterprises complementary role in production and consumption processes and can vary enormously from one type to another for the goal type shared by participants. Network can be based on the exchange process of goods and/or services and/or information or it can appear as an association where enterprises share some objectives or put all together resources or split risks or realize some innovation activities (Soda 1998). In this scenario trust, reputation, negotiation and a lasting collaboration play a major role because they create the cooperative situation necessary for the emerging of the 'network organizational form' able to better manage interdependencies between economic actors. Interdependencies are necessary for the firm survival and enterprise collaboration has been defined by Chandler (1990) as one of the most possible and worthwhile development way of the modern capitalism. He also said (1990) that organizational capabilities generated by firms in networks were the major determinant of the German competitive advantage made possible thanks to the large extent and intense collaboration between enterprises.

Also thanks to this contribution it's possible to better define the firm network concept as the plan of non competitive relationships that link together different types of economic actors, maintaining each one its formal independency and without an unique direction and control system. These are organizational forms based upon cooperation and coordination between firms or other institutions that operate under interdependent conditions (Soda 1998). The interdependencies nature has been one of the major field of research in firm networks literature. It's possible to distinguish first between (Soda 1998):

- generic interdependencies, distinctive of weak links (Grandori 1995) between activities, they don't produce any direct exchange (Rugiadini 1979) and are normally due to be part of the same relationship system;
- sequential interdependencies, when firms and other operators are linked by an input-output relationship; one firm operation influences the 'second operator' action and exchanges between firms are direct and unidirectional;
- reciprocal interdependencies, when each firm output become an input for another operator and vice versa, similar to a crossed sequence.

Sequential and reciprocal interdependencies can be viewed as transactions, so as goods and services exchanges, but generic interdependencies have a different characteristics. In fact 'pooled' interdependencies, as Thompson (1967) call them, even if there is any material exchange are important dependency forms. Grandori (1995), considering Thompson studies, propose to distinguish between transactional interdependencies and associative ones. The first type of interdependencies are exchange ones and the second is based on common actions, behaviours and resources that generate association. In this terms it's possible to endorse widespread actions like a common brand and promotion policy, as in the 'Acta project'.

Networks can have a vertical or cross dimension; the first one is when the network operates along the value chain, for example between supplier and customer, the second one when firms operate at the same level, for example between competitors of the same market.

Economic actors involved in networks can be different, not only firms, but universities, private or public institutions, banks and other operators interested in building stricter relationships in a special context.

So it's possible to say that a network (Soda 1998):

- is held by at least two autonomous economic actors;

⁶ Network can be defined as a knot set linked together by relations or connections as in Wellman and Berkowitz (1988, p. 4).

- the autonomy must be not only legal but also economic (Airoldi 1989), so firms can't be linked by share exchanges between enterprises owners (Soda 1998);
- there must be an interdependency situation between operators involved;
- it's possible to define some relationships governance mechanisms between firms based upon links, reciprocal influence, cooperation and exchange processes (Grandori 1995; Grandori e Soda 1995; Ebers 1997).

During the years a lot of authors have put their attention in exactly define firm networks as an hybrid organizational form between enterprise and market⁷, but in this paper only contribution strictly related to elements important to define Polo Ceramico of Faenza, CPA structures and ceramic artefact firms relationships as a 'soft' network, based on social exchange and highly cooperative (Alter and Hage 1993), will be considered.

With this aim it's necessary to briefly focus the attention on main properties of networks as defined by Tichy, Thushman and Fombrum (1979): relationship subject, object, nature and network structural characteristics. The authors, basing their analysis on this four factors, created a map of the elements that characterize a firm network, as shown below:

Relationship content	Relationship object	Relationship nature	Structural properties of the network
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transactions; • Information; • Affective rules and relationships; • Associations. (Mitchell 1969) 	<i>Relationship complexity:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope of the task; • Uncertain environment; • Volume; • Time lasting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensity; • Specificity; • Strength; • Longevity; • Frequency; • Reciprocity; • Expectations; • Formalization; • Multiplicity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dimension; • Connectivity; • Centrality; • Power; • Sub-groups; • Structural equivalency.

Tab 1. Analysis determinants of a firm network (source: adapted from Soda 1998)

Elements above enable to recognize a network type from another and the relationship forms that link the operators each other. Their brief review would be useful to identify which type of network and relationships have been created for the 'Acta project' described below⁸.

Most author contributions⁹ base the relationship content definition on exchanges, then it's possible to recognize different type of network looking at the 'exchanged object', as done for example by Mitchell (1969) (Tab 1) or Johannisson (1987) that discriminate by:

- production networks, orientated to goods and services exchanges, they are based on transactions as defined above;
- personal networks, based on emotional and interpersonal factors and where exchanges have affective and friendship base;
- symbolic networks, founded on identification and belongings sense where operators share values and projects.

The object of the relationship is represented by goals the links have. A lot of classifications can be found in network literature but perhaps the most important for the aim of the paper is the one that discriminates between strategic and operative relationships (Jarillo and Stevenson 1991). The first type is held to create new products or to enter in new markets, the second one is based on agreements for cutting production costs. The scope of the task identifies the factor quantity of

⁷ For more details see for example: Commons (1934), Coase (1937, 1960), and Williamson (1975).

⁸ For more details see Soda (1998, p. 64-130). This review would focus on key elements to define subject, object, nature and structural properties of the Acta network and so the aim is not to present a complete review of the related literature.

⁹ For more details see for example Mitchell (1973).

elements to be taken under control (Galbraith 1973) and their diversity. The uncertainty is important for firm networks, above all when they are built to carry on research & development activities, to enter in new markets, to act as lobbies, etc (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). Volume of the relationship can be understood as 'intensity', a quantitative dimension of complexity that arises when involvement required to reach relationship goals is high.

The intensity in nature relationship can be defined as "the kind and amount of resource investment that takes place between two organizations" (Rogers 1974, p.61). Some factors that can be useful to test relationship intensity are the ones used by Rogers (1974) to study the links between ten territorial promotion agencies as *personal contact* between agencies directors, *interaction frequency* to discuss actions carried on by different units, *information exchange* by reports, mailing, etc, *resource exchanges* as people, materials, funds, etc, *common board directors*, *write agreements*, to develop common projects under an agency direction, who stated that the co-presence of all this elements reveal the highest degree of the intensity of the liaison. Another way to identify the intensity degree of a relationship is by observing resources and information flows. For information flows, for example, intensity can be measured by looking to messages, contacts, meeting number between network members. On this background Van de Ven (1976) said that the most significant is resource flow from an organization to a group of someone else, the most important is its power or control position in the net. Much studies have focused their attention on intensity and it's essential to remind the relationship between intensity and specific assets. Williamson contribution (1975) about particular assets acquired by firms to be part of a network is probably the most important. Assets can be considered as specific when their value in between the relationship is higher that in any other case (Williamson 1975, 1985). Specific assets can be represented by people or other resources, can be symmetric or not (Grandori 1995) and can create some particular situations named, in transaction cost economy, the 'little number' law which can assume the extreme form of bilateral monopoly. Obviously, when specific assets exist the link intensity is higher because actors must do planned exchanges or spent a lot of money to leave the relationship and with this option opportunistic behaviour probability arise (Williamson 1985). The Williamson vision, however, doesn't consider the social part of the relationship that think about specific assets as opportunity to cooperate and collaborate thank to trust, knowledge of each other, firm reputation and cooperative advantages. Linked to this different social way of considering relationship is the definition of strength of ties: "the strength of the relation" indicates "the degree to which individuals honor obligations or forego personal costs to carry out obligations (Mitchell 1969) or by the number of contacts in a unit of time" (Thicy, Tushman and Fombrum 1979). Granovetter (1973) focus much of its attention on this field demonstrating that to understand network phenomenon often weak connections are more important than strong ones¹⁰. In fact, interactions can generate exchange circumstances and opportunity to know each other better to easily realize common projects based on information, knowledge and know-how (Soda 1998). In this case personal relationships between people working in different firms, participating to the network, facilitate this opportunity and positive experience during the time make the link stronger (Soda 1998). Always in the social context it's important to consider trust, that can be view as probability that an actor will act in the expected way (Gambetta 1989) and that is the necessary element for social liaisons (Blau 1964). In this type of links, operators can accept not equilibrate situation for a brief period, trusting in a medium-long term exchange equity, if there is a high connection frequency and the liaison is long lasting¹¹. This is true especially when there is reciprocity between firms, so when to an action done by an operator the other one acts as expected, following a fixed scheme (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994; Soda 1998). Reciprocity is clear in voluntary relationships and is based on the cooperation propensity more than on competitive one (Soda 1998). If there is a fixed scheme, as said above, there is some expectation, or better, a clear expectation upon other operator behaviour which is important to build trust but also to reduce 'relational uncertainty' (Perrone 1990) which emerge in each type of link and can't be removed by formal contracts¹². Agreements can be an important element to shape rules and behaviours but always leave some discretionary action range that be controlled only by social exchanges (Blau 1964) that are the basis for social network, operating without any writing contract but only thanks to interaction social mechanisms (Grandori 1995). This systems allow different type of exchanges at the same time between actors, a characteristic named

¹⁰ The relationship strength can be measured in different ways, for more details see: Krackhardt (1993) and Lin, Dayton and Greenwald (1978).

¹¹ For more details about time lasting and frequency of the relationship see Soda (1998).

¹² Formal contract are by their nature incomplete and so can't predict what will occur during the time especially when the situation is complex and the relationship is long term (Blau 1964).

multiplicity which consider the variety of liaisons linking firms. And when relations are multiple they are supposed to be more stable as stated by Aldrich and Whetten (1981).

Many of relationship characteristics described above are necessary to investigate the last element of the Tichy, Tushman and Fombrum (1979) model: the structural properties of networks, where links design different forms of net that can help to identify 'centrality, prestige, degree centrality, closeness centrality, betweenness centrality, information centrality' (Wasserman and Faust 1994) of any actor. To this aim it's possible to consider the *dimension* of the net which relating to the net class observed. In fact the number of partners can represent an important condition to determine the coordination effectiveness (Phillips 1990) and it can be very useful to plan the coordination mechanisms of the network (Grandori e Soda 1992; Grandori 1997; Soda 1998). It's also true that, when the number of partners arise, risk is better shared and so the group risk propensity grow up because costs and responsibilities are mutual (Grandori 1995)¹³. Related to the dimension construct is the connectivity problem, or the network density concept¹⁴, that helps to determine if operators are strictly linked one another or not and that can help to understand if the network generate relational capital, a resource for any of the actors involved and for the net itself. As stated by Soda and Usai (1997) 'The most important is the connectivity degree of the relationship network and the most stable and equilibrate structure it has – no sub-groups or coalitions – the most important will be the amount of relational capital for network firms'. This type of capital is not a single firm property but an asset of a set of them and its presence can help the entire network to force other operators such are Government and financial institution to satisfy its demands (Soda and Usai 1997). Often queries are presented by a firm or institution which has a dominant position in the network. This operator is positioned in a strategic way in the exchange system, in the middle of processes, information and goods switch that are central for the network survival and success (Freeman 1979). It's the operator that take part to more links in comparison of other partners (Nieminen 1973). The centrality problem in network has been long studied for example by Leavitt (1951) that views the centrality as strictly linked with leadership and influence capabilities viewed as the ability of a firm to manipulate to some extent the decision process of the network (Rugiadini 1979)¹⁵. But also 'mediator' and 'guardian' firms can play a major role in networks because they regulate and/or control the access to leader operator and by this way acquire power and resources easily in respect to other firms (McEvily and Zaheer 1995; Wellman 1988)¹⁶. In this category it's possible to identify a special type of mediator named 'brokers' which have a strategic role in social network (Boissevain 1974) and 'facilitate transactions between other operators in the network that don't have direct liaisons or trust' (Marsden 1982). For this role very often brokers are perceived from other operators as leaders, depending on their high degree of betweenness centrality that appears as an antecedent of power influence in network decision processes (Freeman, Roeder and Mulholland 1980). The attention put on these definitions depends on the Acta project studied below where it would be clear that 'Polo Ceramico di Faenza', the leader, has created a social network between artefact producers using CPA structures as brokers. In fact traditional ceramic artefact producers have no direct link or trust with the Polo structure but know the CPA mission and location, put in each municipality, and people operating inside coming from the same town they are and that have been prepared by Polo Ceramico of Faenza during the learning period, done before the CPA creation. From another point of view is clear that 'Polo Ceramico di Faenza' has the most prestigious position in the network as Soda (1997) stated for a marketing multilevel network where, as done in the 'Acta project', firms were associated in a straight down model creating a 'broker level' (CPA net) to this aim. More, the centrality of the Polo finds other support in Krackhardt (1990) studies: he said that in a social structure is more important the perfect knowledge of the network that its formal position and the Faenza association created the project to submit to the ministry of 'Attività Produttive' before becoming its manager.

The last element to be reminded on this subject for the case analysis is the clustering property (Tichy, Tushman and Fombrum 1979). Studies done on this subject found that in complex social sets the functioning is guaranteed by sub-groups action (Holland and Leinhardt 1979; Tichy, Tushman and Fombrum 1979; Warner 1941). Sub-groups can appear when relationships are transitive and reciprocal or when the number that a firm can manage is not enough. When one of these situations

¹³ Even if it's necessary to remind that when the partner number is too high coordination costs arise because environment is not so predictable and controlled as actors normally desire (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

¹⁴ There are different methods for density measurement as the Aldrich and Whetten (1981) one or the Wasserman and Faust (1994) that can be also found in Soda (1998).

¹⁵ More studies about this subject can be found for example in Hopkins (1964).

¹⁶ For more details on role played by different operators inside the network set see: Boissevain (1974), Coleman (1990), Marsden (1982), McEvily and Zaheer (1995), Soda (1998).

emerge the cluster 'locks up' because these processes support internal relationships and make more difficult to maintain external ties. But if there are links between sub-groups it's possible to delineate a net of networks (Soda 1998).

Combining characteristics of firm networks and ties it's possible to define different types of organizational networks as bureaucratic, proprietary and social ones or using another classification frame as 'cooperation competitive' and 'symbiotic cooperation' networks (Alter and Hage 1993)¹⁷. Social networks, the most interesting for paper ends¹⁸, are based on the 'human side' (Griesinger 1990; McGregor 1960) of the relationship. From this perspective ties between firms depend on relationships plan of information, normative and affective exchanges between people inside the participant organizations that couldn't be included in formal contract whatever they are and that can be understood only by a social exchange point of view. Social exchanges can either represent a support for economic exchanges networks or be used as a different type of net, where social exchange features shape relationships and structure of the set. So social influence viewed as "an interpersonal transaction able to change or maintain a specific behaviour following the action firm expectations (Rugiadini 1979)" plays a major role in identifying connection between individual acts and networks relationships produced (Friedkin and Cook 1990). Social influence as Meyer (1994) said can be the result of two different factors: direct contacts and structural cohesion. The link between social influence and direct contacts is clear, more difficult is to explain the one with structural cohesion. The basis of this notion is in actors social closeness and particularly in the relationships profiles proximity inside the net. The more is the cohesion and density in the net the more will be the probability of emerging influence processes (Soda 1998). So in social networks there is a light intensity of the tie because few are specific resource investments (Rogers 1974), but other elements as trust, reciprocity, and links multiplicity make the liaison strong. Also, when nets include quite a lot of organization connectivity degree is generally high and coordination mechanisms are very similar to the ones observed in 'groups' (Grandori 1995). Because of the reduced amount of specific resource investments, opportunism features are rarer respect of other networks types even if tie longevity is elevated. These nets can appear always to be symmetric, but it's not true, because also in social networks there are central positions, more prestigious firms or broker organizations that have different roles as facilitating external connections, enabling information and resource best location and transfer and supporting cohesion and connectivity inside the net (Aldrich and Glinov 1990). Social firms relationships are normally, by their nature, delegated to people inside the participant firms (Aldrich and Glinov 1990; Granovetter 1985), are based on social exchange theory (Blau 1964) and the superimposition content became essential (Soda 1998).

Even if it's possible to have common properties of social network like medium/big size, high frequency and intensity of economic exchanges localized, reciprocal orientation, reciprocity in relationships, trust, high intensity in information transfer, economic, social, single and collective results shared, collective punishment and reputation, it's possible to use different analysis frames as the one proposed by Alter and Hage (1993) between 'symbiotic cooperation' networks, which involve firms operating in different level of the value chain or in diverse economic sectors¹⁹ and 'competitive cooperation', between organization operating in the same sector, also called horizontal nets. These two network classes are analysed by the authors considering the cooperation level required and the net dimension. The *cooperative competitive nets*, more interesting from the point of view of the paper, can be competitive network with limited, moderate and high level cooperation. Inside the limited ones exchanges are based on information, social benefits as friendship and economic goods, the coordination level required is quite low and the opportunism feature is not a risk, the base to build such form of net is a general interest in some subjects and for this reason it's not necessary to create

¹⁷ It's true that there are other classification types not considered in this paper, but the ones selected appear to be the most interesting to explain Acta project network type. For more details on networks classifications and characteristics of frames reminded see Soda (1998).

¹⁸ Bureaucratic nets can be viewed as a formalized manner to coordinate relationships normally using exchange contracts or the association outline (Grandori e Soda 1995). In this type of net written deals state not only economic part of the relationship but also behaviour that have to be respected and information, decision and control rights of each set 'partner' (Grandori 1995). The same situation is found in associations where there are rules to entry, to outgo, to operate inside the net. It's possible to define to different types of bureaucratic network (Grandori 1995): nets where coordination is assured by rules, planning and procedures and or to supervision and authority; networks where management is done by two different type of contracts, both incomplete: association agreement and contracts based upon obligations.

Property networks are the ones where 'partners' jointly own property rights and/or participate to activity results (Soda 1998).

¹⁹ For details about 'symbiotic cooperation' networks see Alter and Hage (1993) and Soda (1998, p. 163- 167).

protection mechanisms. Competitive networks with moderate cooperation consider different subject types as technological, economics and political ones, some of them are based on bureaucratic mechanisms and some others on property right sharing, but all of them are based on support activities and not on production ones. In this case it's important to observe as Soda (1998) do that 'moderate competitive' networks include activities that can greatly influence value generation and firms involved identity. 'High competitive' networks creation, instead, are strictly related to value creation and competitiveness and is the type created by 'Acta Project' where participant firms are highly competitive between them in each municipality but cooperate to create a better image of Italian ceramic artefacts thanks to a sole brand that help to improve the product value and to conquer international markets as illustrated below.

The 'Acta project'

The 'Acta project' has been financed by the 'Attività Produttive' Italian Ministry following the 13th article of the law number 273/02 and has been sponsored by AICC, Cna, Confartigianato, ACAI, CASA and CLAAI (all artisans Italian associations). The project started in November 2003 and ended on the 30th April of 2005 as a ministry financed project, but is still active in most of the 33 originally participant municipalities, supported by them and by artisans category associations.

The name of the project is the acronym of its aim (Azioni per lo sviluppo del comparto Ceramico italiano e la Tutela dell'Artigianato Artistico) which is to develop the ceramic sector and to protect in particular artistic artefact segment.

The 'Italian Traditional' artefact segment has quickly lost, along the past five years, in competitiveness, laboratory number and occupation given and so the project first end was to promote the "CAT- Ceramica Artistica e Tradizionale" brand to develop innovation, marketing actions, communication and sales activities also in the international context.

It's possible to define different ends of the project dividing them in four different objectives: CAT brand promotion, creation of the CPA (Centri di Promozione dell'Artigianato – artisan promotion centers) network, participation to exhibitions and developing tourist sector synergies, other horizontal support activities also with CPA collaboration. It's also true that depending on support given by different municipalities the 'Acta project' has participated to other activities to promote the traditional ceramic sector value and potentialities.

Let's review actions done to reach the first two ends, the central ones, commenting them with theory recalled above to fully understand the decision reasons that made the project success.

As in all marketing plans, whatever it's the final action objective, the first step is to do target analysis to define market characteristics and by this way, better acts to implement. This primary step was done by the project manager, 'Polo Ceramico di Faenza', first using Eurisko Sinottica data and then Doxa ones. The Sinottica data provide information about Italian socio-cultural evolution, consumption behaviours and media exposure return. Results for the 'Acta project' define a focus target of 7.330.295 individuals, aged from 25 to 54 years, 75,2% women and 24,8% men with an high educational level (university degree or diploma), with a medium-high income level, love for their house and spending time in make it more beautiful and comfortable, following advertising announces over all the press both in the periodical and daily form (Acta 2005).

Doxa contribution was focused on both qualitative and quantitative research. The first one was done with four focus groups. Results showed that altogether from a symbolic point of view, considered as experiences and perceptions collected, or from a rational position, the shopping expedition experiences and brand analysis, the soul of ceramic product can be found in tradition, on the still alive strong link with the past and on the unique value of artefact products. And it's this last element that distinguishes artistic and traditional ceramics artefacts from other furnishings types (Acta 2005).

These results support the advertising choice upon the "La tradizione vive nelle nostre mani" (tradition is alive in our hands). Slogan to advertise the brand between other suggestions and the chosen pay-off was "tanti stili, un solo segno" (a lot of styles, an unique sign) to point out the uniqueness of the used brand among styles differences that represent the real value of the traditional artistic Italian ceramic scenario (Acta 2005).

The Doxa quantitative research²⁰ was based on 2.000 potential customer telephone interviews in between the defined target to analyse perceptions and experiences referred to traditional ceramic

²⁰ All data used for the 'Acta project' were collected thanks to the Acta report (2005) and by direct interviews done with project managers of 'Polo Ceramico of Faenza' during the plan period.

products. Almost two-thirds of the sample (63%) know and are able to indicate municipalities and other Italian sites of ceramic production; the 32% of the interviewed people have visited, during the past three years, one of the artisan sites of whichever type; three families among 10, representing the 39% of the sample have bought, in the same period, ceramic artefacts for personal use (29%) or for gifts (18%); the most important characteristic for choosing ceramic artefact products is for the 73,8% of the sample the handmade factor. Moreover only the 7% of the interviewed sample were sure to know in some way the CAT brand and the expectation of half the sample is for quality products defence.

From these data it seems that brand essence, the brand identity central point, can be found both in tradition and handmade factor while the core identity that helps in building brand identity can be identified in elements as the strong link with the past, the high value of artefact ceramics and their quality.

From a brand image point of view the CAT picture couldn't be considered strong at all, as happens to a new brand, not only with respect to final consumers but also to operators that haven't noticed the advertising campaign at all, as described below. This remark is perfectly consistent with Brondoni (2000/2001) studies who says that at the launch time "no specific relationship" exists between brand and its target market and that brand-building starts with a precise identity definition. This has been done considering the most important factors emerging from data collection and trying to insert them also in the brand graphics where there is both a common part of the brand, the above one, that refers to tradition, and a special part of it that permits the recognition of the artefact location origin, which send back to special production type and handmade techniques used. By this way brand definition was based on product differences and "product's geographic and historic roots" as stated by Brondoni (2000/2001).

But, as said above, brand-building process can't be achieved only with this first step, it's necessary to support the brand by communications to create the correct brand perception and, by this way, brand equity.

Awared of this, 'Polo Ceramico of Faeza' prepared its communication action with the intention to select better media combination with respect to the identified target and the budget given. From a target point of view the aim of the advertising campaign was both on the general side of public opinion trying to create a favourable feeling upon CAT brand and on the selected target identified by Eurisko Sinottica study. Media used were 16 with 137 advertisements.

Looking at Kapferer brand equity modelling (figure 4) it can be said that the 'Acta project' focused its attention not only to build brand perception of recipient, preliminary identified with Eurisko Sinottica data, but also to create an acceptance environment touching other market operators as competitors, general demand and 'noises', generating a sort of support action to end customer brand perception building.

Communication results reached on the consumer side were satisfactory because net contacts, people that viewed almost one time the message, were 5.702.000, the 80,2% of the target and qualified covering, people who viewed almost three times the advertisement, was up to 4.970.000, the 69,9% of the identified target. Estimated readings were up to 36.607.000 considering a medium frequency of 6,4²¹.

Looking at these results all together with Aacker brand equity frame it's possible to do some final observations. For a brand loyalty point of view (figure 2), consumers are committed to the product type, but not to the CAT brand (see Doxa quantitative research results), because only 7% of the sample knew the brand in some way, but not consider this the determinant element to buy, it's only considered as another good reason for the choice, but not the first one. Also the brand awareness is not so strong, even if traditional ceramic artefacts have on their own a strong product class awareness. From quality perceived point of view, this represents the main function expected from brand use to recognize better products, for almost half of the interviewed sample and perhaps the most immediate dimension, attributed to branded ceramic artefacts. Associations with CAT brand are still few and for this reason the communication campaign has used the image of a person working on ceramic, trying to exploit the handmade element which is a brand essence component. Contrary to all other elements brand exclusive resources are strong, because the disciplinary book and the public inventory which inscription is controlled by a special commission enable to protect artefacts and give a patent recognition to artisans production by the established norms. From the above it's perhaps true that equity perception for traditional ceramic artefacts is very high but is still divided following the production location origin, while CAT brand equity is not at the same level and require a lot of communication investments to be associated to granted traditional ceramic artefacts.

²¹ This is the people number who normally read the same newspaper, according to research agency hypothesis.

For this reason the promotion action was directed also to producers segment side were results were worst than the ones of consumer end segment. Artisans have been contacted to promote the use of the CAT brand following this ends:

- promote the appliance of the CAT brand on artefacts;
- prepare artisans to the starting communication action to make them fully involved in it;
- illustrate the 'Acta project' and all prepared actions and timing;
- description of the appliance procedure for CAT brand.

With this aim 1.300 especially prepared information leaflets were sent to artisans and then they have been called by phone. 1076 were the useful contacts²² from where it would be clear that 17 artisans had already been registered in the public inventory for some of their products, 1.037 have never been registered, 22 operators had some CAT branded artefacts but hadn't renewed their appliance. 412 artisans notice the communication campaign made thanks to 'Acta project', 664 didn't become aware of it at all. At the same time 202 were the telephone calls received inside the project, 126 of them to get some information about the applying procedure and the public register and rules to have the CAT brand; 10 of them asked the promotional kit²³ prepared, 57 requested information about the CAT brand general features, 3 asked information about CAT branded adhesives, 6 other telephone calls were for other different reasons. This first activity wasn't very successful, as clear from data above, and so tutors operating at the CPA bureaus were delegated to directly contact local artisans to collect the necessary information and give some support²⁴. At the project end the situation was the following: 4 municipalities were waiting for the disciplinary book approval from the 'Consiglio Nazionale Ceramico' (Ceramic National Council), 11 municipalities had to name the experts commission, 15 municipalities among 33 were not able to issue the CAT brand²⁵. As resulted from data above is clear that one of the major actor in the CAT promotion process must be the ceramic operator that uses for some of its product the brand pushing its diffusion among the selected target that is still committed to traditional ceramic handmade artefacts and that play a major role in pushing up the CAT brand equity. The real problem to achieve this communication action is mostly represented from the high fragmentary situation of artisan production in Italy in terms of resistance to collaborate for the promotion of a common brand which is still viewed as a lost of diversity and value, to some extent. But the true is that collaboration is the only way small artefact firms have to compete in the international scenario and that decisions on strategies to adopt for this global concurrence can't be delayed over time.

To contest this problem, common to small realities afraid to loose their competitive advantage that made them successfully in the past, Acta project tried to create the necessary network to promote ad effectively use CAT brand building a social network with a broker net inside to power relationships between different operators called to be plan participants.

The broker net was created by opening 33 CPA bureaus in 13 Italian regions where are the most famous municipality for traditional ceramic artefacts. In fact, as stated above, brokers are necessary when there is any direct or trusting relationship between focal firm, in this case, the marketing operator, 'Polo Ceramico of Faenza', and other knots of the net, artisan producers. The CPA responsible operators were selected among people of the same municipality of the creating CPA, having some ceramic experience, because firm owner on its own or economic operators involved in ceramic sector problems. This way of selecting people was decided to ensure a specific and direct knowledge of each municipality reality and limits to better answer to specific emerging situations that has to be readily afforded during the project period. But the same people known by artisans have been trained by a course three months long to acquire marketing specific knowledge to prepare people to be active in the CPA structure, also looking at communication and brand features necessary to make the project successful. After the training course 'firm tutors' opened respective CPA bureaus and started an on-the-job training period with aims as: CAT brand local promotion, quantitative and qualitative data collection, realization of a virtual shop-window on the ACTA web site, starting the newsletter service, special training periods, participation in municipalities actions, creation of an action related to both ACTA project and local features, participation to the 'innovation and service' action promoted by the project manager and requested support to artisans. All data collected and other information were used to build the ACTA website (www.progettoacta.it). The website has a

²² 224 operators were deleted because impossible to contact for different reasons.

²³ The kit was composed by a decalcomania, an exposition bench, some guarantee certificate thin cards, cards to show the branded products.

²⁴ We will talk about the CPA network, its ends and functioning, during the description of the second objective of the plan.

²⁵ One of the main reasons for this it's the difficulty to create in the CCIAA bureaus the public inventory itself.

general part and a reserved area. The first one, apart for the home page, has information about CAT brand, the virtual shop-window, the list of traditional ceramic artisans in each of the participant municipalities, a ceramic glossary to help on-line visitors and also give the possibility to do a specific research by words or subjects and to contact the manager website. The reserved area only permits the access to artefact producers to ask information or have news from the project coordination team.

By this description of activities carried on by CPA is clear that broker net was necessary to assure the necessary coordination between focal firm and artisans which can be understood as external knots of the main network, also because the information technologies used to carry on the project were unknown to almost the operators that found in the local CPA the necessary support to fully participate to the project.

Looking at this second ACTA end, it's possible to define the network build by 'Polo Ceramico of Faenza' and all traditional ceramic artisans of participant municipality a net based on information exchange, sharing the objective to promote traditional ceramics in an international context using a common brand and maintaining their legal and economic independence. Using Grandori (1995) studies it's possible to recognize in the Acta interdependencies an associative character and an horizontal dimension because participant firms operate at the same level and are competitors apart from the project manager that is also the focal firm. From a determinants point of view the 'Acta project' network (see Tab. 1) has an information and an association content and can be understood as a symbolic form of net where operators share values and projects.

Looking at the object of the relationship is possible to see its strategic character because net has been created to enter in new markets. The scope of the task is not simple to realize because the quantity of elements to control is quite high, first of all quality, and also uncertainty play a major role in this new international scenario. From a nature relationship point of view intensity is quite low and no specific assets have been bought by participants, also because all financial resources were given by the 'Attività Produttive' Ministry. It's also true that CPA net provides the necessary personal relationships that were necessary to make the social network functioning also when artisans are not in contact each others. The ACTA project network has some structural properties, particularly the central role of the 'Polo Ceramico of Faeza' that can be viewed as the leader because it can greatly influence the decision process of the network, managing the entire project.

Looking at all the elements above it's possible to recognize in the 'Acta project' network a social net, based on the 'human side' of the relationship mostly entrusted to CPA responsible, ties intensity is low and there is any specific investment but ends and values are fully shared. From Alter and Hage (1993) point of view the 'Acta project' network can be understood as a high competitive net created inside the 'cooperative competitive' frame where participant firms compete at the same level but collaborate to promotion activities.

The described project, that is still active in 13 municipalities that financially support them on they own, can represent a good base to build a strong brand equity for the CAT brand and for traditional ceramic handmade sector in general, putting together advantages coming from a common brand, a brand-range policy and social networks. But it's only a first step considering that building brand awareness and brand equity is not a two-years process and also to maintain brand identity requires special actions and policies. Considering that only 13 municipalities have decided to invest on this project, the sensation is that economic operators are not enough conscious about the relevance of changes in the competitive scenario and the necessity to support 'Made in Italy' artefacts. Moreover, artisans are the first contrary force to collaborate, still closed in their limited view of the product and not considering that their firm alone cannot compete at the level required by nowadays market.

Furthermore, when financial resources are limited, synergies can play a major role for the entire network, finding a support in other ties as the ones with tourism or typical products segments that are still too far from artisans culture and from their way to do business. But, thinking about actions achieved by local CPAs, these structures could be also used to realize promotion actions all together not only in traditional ceramic sector but in all artefacts segments, realizing synergies and new communication campaigns necessary not to loose results achieved by the 'Acta project'. In fact, from another point of view the public financial support to the project, which made it possible and helped a lot of artisans to have an international visibility thanks to the continually updated website, was a first step, but it has been perceived as a solution for the ceramic sector difficulties and not like a pushing action with the aim to make clear how important are common brand and collaborative promotion activities to build a unique image and, by this way, a sustainable competitive advantage.

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