

Trade fairs as source of knowledge – the role of trade fairs organizer

Work in progress paper

Abstract

During trade fairs various forms of communication take place and can be observed. The key role is played by interactive ways of communication such as meetings, but also in form of events and conferences, which often accompany the exhibition. Knowledge is crucial element of interest to both visitors and exhibitors. Presenting information and sharing knowledge occurs parallel with traditional features of trade fairs. However the role of trade fairs in knowledge sharing process is still unrecognized. Our assumption is that the learning process is constructed and evolves during the communication process that occurs between trade fairs parties. The trade fairs organizer is in contact with a large number of companies from certain industries, and many of these firms are innovative (assuming that during trade fairs new products are exhibited). Therefore the organizer can determine what information is needed in the industries. In this sense trade fairs organizer can act as broker of knowledge.

In the paper, which is a work in progress, we take into consideration whether such a role is played by the trade fair organizer, who is a member of many professional networks, gathers information and creates the conditions for its spread. We present a study of specific industry. The research was conducted among polish exhibitors and visitors to compare their opinion on trade fair organizer and its role in knowledge sharing process.

Keywords: knowledge sharing process, trade fairs, trust

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge-based economy is based on the creation, transfer and practical use of knowledge and information (O.E.C.D., 1996). Industries, business networks and individual firms thus need access to knowledge from different sources and in different forms. Starting point of our study is that knowledge is generated in interaction with other parties, which makes it context specific, as dependent on a particular time and space situation (Nonaka et al., 2000, 635-652). During trade fairs there is no physical distance between actors in the network; moreover many actors meet at the same time. This creates specific conditions for the exchange of information and knowledge-building.

Knowledge is crucial element of interest to both visitors and exhibitors. The roles of visitors and exhibitors often overlap from this point of view. Visitors (industrial buyers, architects, consultants etc.) attend trade shows to learn about new solutions, suppliers, and products (Gopalakrishna et al. 1995, 22-42); by interacting with products and prototypes, exhibitor staff and other customers, visitors obtain tacit knowledge about market offerings that would otherwise be difficult to acquire (Borghini et al. 2006, 1151-1159). However, visitor's learning is often related to broader issues, rather than to specific purchase acts (Rinallo et al. 2008). Exhibitors, instead, use trade fairs to enter a new market or to build their image and maintain relations (Rosson, Seringhaus 1995, 81-90). Each exhibitor meets the problem of direct comparison with competitor's offer, so they treat knowledge as a unique resource (Wernerfelt 1984, 171-180), which can differentiate them. Presenting information and sharing knowledge occurs parallel with traditional features of trade fairs (Hansen 1996, 39-53). However the role of trade fairs in knowledge sharing process is still unrecognized.

So far emphasis has been placed on the exhibitors' objectives of trade fairs participation and on evaluating selling effectiveness. In the literature from the field of sales and marketing the theme of trade fairs is discussed in majority of cases from exhibitor's (seller's) point of view, meanwhile needs, motives and behaviours of visitors still remain underestimated. Recently it has been pointed out, that trade fair is an event which allow for market observation and sourcing and thus it can contribute to development and dissemination of innovation. Those features of trade shows render them perceivable as temporary clusters (Maskel et al., 2006, 997-1013). These studies, however, did not relate to the role played by the trade fair organizer. It is the specific business-to-business actor, acting as an intermediate between the expectations of exhibitors and visitors. If these actors expect the exchange of information during trade fairs, it raises questions about what is the role of organizer in the exchange of knowledge process and how it is perceived in this process by other actors? Whether and how trade fairs organizer stimulate the process of knowledge sharing within the network? Do and how organizations process knowledge during trade fairs? In the paper we assume that trade fairs are the channel and simultaneously the system for the spread of innovation. The trade fairs organizer may be limited to creating the conditions for the flow of information, or to act as a broker of knowledge. We analyze the case of the Poznań International Fair and the perception of its role as an animator of knowledge exchange in polish stone industry.

TRADE FAIRS ORGANIZER AS AN ACTOR IN INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Trade fairs had been linked to sales, where the number and value of commercial contracts resided as a crucial and often the only barometer of how effective participation in a fair was. In the initial period of development, the success of the trade fair depended on the quality and quantity of exhibitors. Subsequently a large number of potential visitors became a key factor in attracting exhibitors, which, from their point of view, confirmed the effectiveness of their marketing investment. During the development of trade fairs exhibitors started to perceive those events not only as a place to sell but also as a place to build their image. It led to change in visitors' profile – buyers constitute a decreasing percentage of trade fair attendees, and

increasingly more people are seeking non-commercial information (PIPT 2010). In response to the diversity of visitors exhibitors provide at their booths the opportunity to communicate not only with salespeople, but also with technical staff, and with employees responsible for R & D and design.

Moving away from a trade fair model based on the buyers-salespeople meeting transforms trade fairs to events which gather together in one place actors from different regions, equipped with a diversity of knowledge and competence (Rinalo, Golfetto 2011). It provides interactions between spatial proximity and relational, institutional and social proximity, which have an impact on mutual learning and innovation (Bonoma 1983, 87-94).

Trends presented above are particularly evident in Europe, where the market structure is conditioned by history and ownership. International trade fairs are organized in more than 100 major European cities, and most of exhibition space available for worldwide exhibition is located in Europe (Flackett 2006). The fairgrounds are generally located in city centers, and their owner has a public character. A company owning the fairgrounds is also often the organizer of trade fairs. Those companies create an institutional environment which guides and facilitates the actions needed to present innovations and exchange knowledge about them. In realizing this function, the role of the organizers of trade fair events has evolved from that of facilitating the physical space to the broader one of being a catalyst in the encounter of supply and demand. Their focus, which in the past was mainly on the exhibitor, has now become more balanced by the allocation of more of their resources to the acquisition of the sufficient number and quality of visitors (Berne et al., 2007, 146–157). In order to increase the attractiveness of the trade fairs and allow to go beyond the traditional buyer-seller interactions, organizers expand the event to support the exchange of information – they offer joint exhibitions, seminars, conferences etc. These activities used to be passive (eg. providing space for conducting the conference) but more often consist in engaging in studying the information needs of participants, looking for speakers, supervision of program content.

Knowledge brokers encourage innovation, primarily by facilitating the transfer of knowledge between individuals, organizations and industry (Ziam et al., 2009, 491-505). The organizer is in contact with a large number of companies from certain industries, and many of these firms are innovative (assuming that during trade fairs new products are exhibited) can therefore determine what information is needed in the industries. However, for the organizers, who have more than one big event in his portfolio, it is possible to move information from the more to less developed industries. These actions are tainted by the activities of knowledge brokers involved in finding the market and transmission of information to market participants need information. Knowledge brokers remain in relationships with many actors and networks. According to the theory of weak ties, this way knowledge brokers can provide bridge between closely related informal or formal networks, thereby supplying a source of specific information and resources. On the other hand, this allows them to constantly monitor the situation in their respective industries and capture innovations that can be applied in other markets, and the fair organizer has facilitated access to numerous industries. Taking into account the characteristics of knowledge brokers we take into consideration whether such a role is played by the fair organizer, who is a member of many professional networks, gathers information and creates the conditions for its spread.

Trade fairs are perceived in Europe through the prism of complex functions (social and city-forming), not only business ones. The new trend is to develop the conference facilities and activities on fairgrounds. This concept receives support from cities' and regions' authorities as trade fairs and conferences are activities which generate mass travel movements and are a type of high-spending business tourism with profound effects on cities (Jefferson and

Lickorish 1991). This reinforces the potential interest of trade fair organizers to promote the exchange of information between the participants of the fair.

THE STUDY

Methodology

International trade fairs are strongly associated with innovations – during trade fairs new products are introduced to the markets and companies enter new markets. Exhibitors maintain the large investments required to bring their innovations, prototypes, and expert personnel to trade shows in order to signal their competencies to current and potential customers (Golfetto, Mazursky 2004). In particular, small and medium-sized companies benefit from trade fairs because their innovations attract more interest in the spotlight of a trade fair than they otherwise would - almost 90% of the exhibitors at German trade fairs want to present innovations (AUMA 2007). For visitors, access to new solutions and developments is far more important than any buying objectives (Smith, Smith, 1999, 23-26.), and the opportunity of seeing innovations is one of the most important factors attracting them to trade fairs. Industrial buyers attend trade shows to learn about new solutions, suppliers, and products (Gopalakrishna et al. 1995, 22–42). In our research the purpose of participation in trade fairs was divided into selling or purchasing, building or maintaining contacts and obtaining information about the trends. The knowledge about trends was operationalized based on division of tacit knowledge (“know-how to take advantage of the trends”) and explicit knowledge (“know-what are the trends”, “know-why the trends appear” and “know-who is an expert on the trends”) (Nonaka, van Krogh, 2009, 635-652).

According to the Rosson and Seringhaus model of trade fairs (Rosson, Seringhaus, 1995, 81-90), the trade fair is an event that can be analyzed through the prism of actor interactions, and more generally through the prism of the interaction network of the actors involved both directly and indirectly in trade fairs. The main participants of the exhibition are the representatives of companies in the given industry. The trade fair participants, the organizer and the environment in which the trade fair takes place all contribute to relationships that exist both before and after the exhibition. This means the phenomena of the trade should be analyzed in terms of the network approach.

We assume that during the diffusion of innovation process the trade fair acts as an element forming part of the social network built on continuous interaction. In this perspective actors share knowledge through interrelationships and knowledge can be extrapolated only through interactions, which provide the basis for receiving new knowledge (Hakansson, Snehota, 1995). Therefore the activities and resources of trade fairs organizers are highly dependent on activities and resources (or needs) of other participants of that network. From this starting point we have assumed that the actions of the trade fairs organizers in the brokering of knowledge should be judged by the other actors - in this case: the exhibitors and visitors, as key participants in that network.

Organizer of the trade fairs, as one of the actors in this network may be one of the sources of information about the trends, along with other actors: suppliers, customers, trade magazines, industry associations and consultants (designers / architects). The significance and credibility of those sources of information should be examined because trust-based communication occurred to be crucial for knowledge-transfer (Cantu, Corsaro 2007).

In the absence of references to the issues of trade fairs organizer in the literature, we decided to perform in the first stage an exploratory research, to produce a concept to prepare a study on European trade fair organizers. In the first phase, the objective is to determine the perception of the role of organizer in the information exchange process in the industry. We decided to confront the opinions of visitors and exhibitors because they form a network

context. The data comes from the trade fairs organizer's official materials, interviews with representatives of the organizer and the studies carried out among participants of the trade fairs.

The opinions of trade fairs participants were collected on the trade fair day which was available exclusively to professionals. The study was conducted among exhibitors using drop & collect method, which guarantees high response rate and results comparable with the results of direct interviews (Leszczynski, Zielinski 2007). Ultimately, 92 questionnaires gathered out of 120 Polish exhibitors' marketing managers were analyzed (77% response rate). Simultaneously 180 direct interviews with Polish visitors who sign up as buyers were conducted (out of 7500 total visitors). In both cases, the tool was the same, structured questionnaire.

Context of the study

Poznan International Fair (PIF) has operated on the Polish market as trade fairs organizer since 1921. It is both the oldest and largest (53.05% of the total exhibition space, 40% of exhibitors and visitors) trade fair organizer in Poland with a total exhibition area of 138 569 m². The largest trade fairs addressed to the B2B market in Central and Eastern Europe are organized in Poznan (PCEI 2010). The majority shareholder in the Poznan International Fair is the state (60%); the city has a 40% stake. The company is both the owner of the fairgrounds and organizer of the events. This company has been selected for study because it invests in the development of conferences, seminars and business meetings accompanying trade fairs. Within 10 years the number of such events rose from 14 to about 1000 (per year). These measures are attractive from the perspective of city authorities, because the fair is regarded as a "magnet" for business tourism. The city authorities view the exhibitions together with conferences as an important factor for the development of the city (Leszczynski et al., 2009).

The exhibition of stone industry was selected for the research out of the nearly 80 trade fairs organized by PIF. It was decided on the basis of the specificity of the industry and the fact that this is a new product offered by PIF (first edition took place in 2008), growing rapidly (each edition recorded double-digit increases in the number of exhibitors, visitors and hired exhibition space).

The Stonemasonry industry in Poland is quite hermetic; most companies have been working on it for more than 10 years. Companies are family-owned and business is based on close relationships and good reputation among customers. There is a Stone Industry Employers' Association, two trade magazines, and co-organizer of the trade fairs, perceived by many companies as an industry chamber. Nevertheless a strong professional organization uniting that industry is missing. Trade fairs play a significant role in the activities of companies in the stonemasonry industry as they give the possibility to meet representatives of all groups operating within the industry.

The industry consists of approximately 10,000 companies, of which 5,500 employ at least two people (other than the owner). The most important part of the market, as opposed to markets in Western Europe, is production of tombs. Stonemasonry industry in Poland is growing mainly due to the growth on construction market (housing, offices and roads) and due to the differentiation of the needs of buyers of tombstones (an effect of departure from the homogeneity of the patterns at the time of communism in favor of a richer form, variety and quality of materials).

In 2008, the stone industry trade fairs, which took place in the southern Poland (where the majority of companies is located) for several years were overtaken by PIF. PIF, as the organizer of the largest fair in that industry in Poland wants to build its image as a network integrator. As this industry in Poland is poorly innovative PIF actively participates in

organizing events related to the exchange of knowledge: co-organizing conferences, promoting events that show innovation etc. One of the elements used to attract exhibitors to the new location was a rich program of conferences and seminars focused mainly on providing information about new products and market trends.

Results of the study

Both groups of respondents (exhibitors and visitors) can be described as experienced, they have worked in the stonemasonry for 10 years. They were mostly representatives of small companies, whose business consisted of an average of 16 employees in a group of visitors and 60 employees in a group of exhibitors group. Both groups visit on average two trade fairs a year. The largest share in both groups had respondents who consider that the information about trends recruit mainly from interviews with people from their own industry (Table 1).

The groups of visitors and exhibitors did not differ significantly among themselves in terms of: characteristics of respondents (work experience), trade fairs experience (the number of events visited), the characteristics of companies in which they work (number of employees) (t test, $p < 0.05$), and its approach to sources of information (test U Mann-Whitney, $p < 0.05$).

In the group of exhibitors trade fairs play an increasing role as a place for acquiring knowledge about trends. However, among the visitors the fair is regarded primarily as a place of communication (maintaining / gaining contacts). Growing importance of trade fairs as events to acquire information on trends was reported by visitors and exhibitors (table 2). Their perception in that area was similar – there were no significant differences.

Both groups had different expectations about the kind of information that may be obtained during trade fair. It was important for both groups to obtain about what are the trends. However visitors expected to collect information on the person who knows something about trends and how to use them to a greater extent than exhibitors (Table 1).

Visitors and exhibitors take part in trade fairs to meet each other because they treat the other party as a most preferred source of information about trends. The least desirable sources of information about trends for both groups include: professional organizations, and the trade fair organizer. However the trade fair organizer was higher evaluated by the visitors than the exhibitors.

Visitors trust the information obtained during trade fairs from their customers, suppliers, trade magazines and advisors rather than from trade fairs organizer. Their trust in all sources of information included in the questionnaire was statistically higher than in case of exhibitors who preferred only suppliers and customers as a source of information. Trade fairs organizer was the only source of information without any significant difference of trust between both groups – it was the least trusted source of information about trends for both groups.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

	exh.(n=92)	vis.(n=180)
Number of years in the stonemasonry industry (average)	10,50	10,03
Number of trade fairs visited as a visitor during the year (average)	1,97	2,04
Number of employees (average)	60,4	16,04
Efforts to acquire knowledge about trends		
I do nothing, the information comes to me	14,4%	12,2%
I talk to people in my industry	45,7%	45,6%
I read professional journals	16,3%	25,6%
I go abroad (to visit trade fairs, suppliers etc)	19,6%	13,9%
n/a	4,3%	2,7%
Type of knowledge on market trends expected from trade fairs by exhibitors and visitors		

(rating scale 1-5, 1-no importance, 5-very important)		
know-what are the trends (average)	4,03	4,22
know-why the trends appear (average)	3,23	3,4
know-who is an expert in the trends (average)	3,03*	3,49*
know-how to take advantage of the trends (average)	3,65*	4,07*
Source of knowledge on market trends preferred by exhibitors and visitors during trade fairs (rating scale 1-5, 1-no importance, 5-very important)		
my suppliers (average)	3,51*	4,02*
my customers (average)	4,04	3,87
professional journals (average)	3,26*	3,68*
chamber of industry (average)	2,84*	3,24*
trade fairs organizer (average)	2,24*	2,77*
consultants (designer, architect) (average)	3,32	3,56
Confidence in the information obtained from various sources (rating scale 0-10, 0-I trust, 10-I do not trust)		
my suppliers (average)	3,62*	2,87*
my customers (average)	3,64*	2,42*
professional journals (average)	4,07*	2,89*
chamber of industry (average)	5,98*	3,44*
trade fairs organizer (average)	5,66	4,11
consultants (designer, architect) (average)	5,35*	2,89*

* difference between the average exhibitor-visitor is statistically significant, t test, $p < 0.05$

Table 2. The role of trade fairs in the past, today and in the future in opinion of exhibitors and visitors (rating scale 1-5, 1-no importance, 5-very important)

	past		today		future	
	exh (n=92)	vis. (n=180)	exh. (n=92)	vis. (n=180)	exh. (n=92)	vis. (n=180)
selling / purchasing	3,43	3,10	3,22*	3,67*	3,25	3,62
maintaining / gaining contacts	3,89*	3,08*	4,04	3,93	3,96	3,90
acquiring information about trends	3,40	3,27	3,70	3,88	3,77	3,77

* difference between the average exhibitor-visitor is statistically significant, t test, $p < 0.05$

CONCLUSIONS

About the study

As a result of the nature of the Polish exhibition industry trade fairs are the events that are often identified with their organizer, (most of the owners of the fairgrounds also organize the trade fairs). Meanwhile, an exhibition is co-created by many actors in the industry and the trade fairs organizer is not perceived as the focal firm in that network. The research carried out in the stonemasonry industry have shown that trade fair participants clearly distinguish the event, which is trade fair, from its organizer. The opinions of visitors and exhibitors show that organizer is not treated as a provider of information on trends. In addition, it does not credit the trust. Trade fairs are events to collect information about current trends and innovations, but the organizer is not the source of it.

Trying to analyze the observed situation attention should be paid to the features of the stone industry and its market structure. There is no a strong professional organization, which could act as an integrator. Companies do not put too much effort into obtaining information on market trends; they rely on their everyday business contacts and journals as the two most

important sources of information. The industry development is based on relationships rather than knowledge therefore brokers of knowledge are probably not needed (yet?). It seems that based on available resources trade fairs organizer tries to fill the gap and act like the broker of knowledge apart from its core activities. PIF was co-organizing conferences, presenting solutions existing in other industries. However, the participants of the trade fairs do not expect knowledge from the trade fair organizer; they expect it from other participants.

In the presented example the trade fairs organizer has taken action consistent with the knowledge brokers, however, it does not entitle to define him with this word. Assuming that the organization is a cognitive system based on knowledge that is produced by a continuous process of learning (Corsaro, Cantu 2007), the challenge for the trade fairs organizer is to develop competencies for the integration and transformation of knowledge from external sources into the organization's knowledge base (Almeida et al. 2002; 147-161) and passing it to customers – visitors and exhibitors among them. Such actions will require actions to change the image of the organizer, which currently is not regarded as a reliable source of information about trends.

About further research

As an exploratory study our one had few obvious limitations: one industry, one country and one trade fairs organizer. But it shows that our work in progress should be continued. These findings lead to the question whether the industry needs brokers of knowledge and who plays or could play that role. This implies a need to determine how knowledge flows within the network during trade fairs and what is the place and role of the trade fairs organizer in this process. One of the solutions may be to conduct research based on the concept of picture of the network. It is interesting to verify who/what is the broker of knowledge – the networks (clusters) created during trade fair or the trade fair organizer?

For comparison, it is necessary to examine also other, more mature industries with complex structure. Polish construction industry may be good choice as trade fairs are set up by the same company but the role of professional organizations and chambers of industry is much higher than at stonemasonry industry. Another case that should be studied in Poland is water and sewage systems industry because trade fairs organized there are strongly influenced by chamber of industry.

The process of knowledge sharing during trade fairs may be also affected by the position and role of trade fairs in the industry, as well as by the cultural context. Therefore that phenomenon should be examined in wider perspective of, at least few countries.

It might be valuable to take into account the issue of time to catch the picture of the network before, during and after the show. It might help to explore how interactions and events at trade fairs reduce asymmetries of ignorance (Fisher 2000) between parties and how they influence construction of new understandings. Our assumption is that the learning process is constructed and evolves during the communication process that occurs between parties. In this sense trade fairs act as broker of knowledge (Benassi, Di Minin 2007), who do not only mediate between customers and suppliers and facilitate transaction, but also add value for involved parties by mediating actors' framings. Consequently in further research we will refer to trade fairs as brokers of framing that enable the formation process of business networks.

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