

Use of the Internet in maintaining networks in small businesses – a study in European art markets

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Abstract

This paper focuses on networks and relationships in an unusual type of market that is characterised by high uncertainty, the markets of contemporary arts. We discuss the importance of reputation and legitimacy in entry to the network and argue that the ways in which actors adapt to each other are changing due to the use of new media. However, the role of new media does not seem to affect the importance of personal contact in *creating* relationships, particularly in these highly uncertain markets where relationships are still founded on trust and friendship. Results are based on extensive qualitative interviews in four European countries.

Purpose of the Paper

Traditionally, small business networks have been built on the owner-manager's personal communications with colleagues and other entrepreneurs. This has meant establishing relationships on a face-to-face basis or through other means of social interaction. Currently, we are witnessing a change in the ways in which these relationships are upheld: the Internet has proved an effective substitute for conventional social interaction. This is taking place even in markets with high uncertainty that have traditionally relied on face-to-face presence in relationship building. Findings from the contemporary art markets in four European countries are discussed.

The aim of the research is to discuss how networks are created and how a new player enters the network in art markets. Particularly, the paper focuses on distinguishing possible changes in the way the actors adapt themselves to each other in the process of network creation and what the use of new media might imply there. The emphasis is on trust building and the role of legitimisation and reputation within this adaptation process.

The empirical analysis is based on 80 interviews on art managers, artists and other informants within the contemporary art market. E-mail was used to complement interviews for up-to-date information on the Internet use of galleries with current email addresses. The interviews were conducted in Finland, Sweden, France, and Great Britain. The contemporary art market was chosen because of the high uncertainty in the market and the high importance of personal relations. The

qualitative study is carried out using an explanatory idiographic approach (Tsoukas 1989, Sayer 1992) viewed from the realist paradigm. Two Scandinavian markets and two more mature Middle European markets are chosen to reduce the dependency of the analysis on the particular features of one country. The focus of the paper is on art markets as a whole, and cross-country analysis is not the primary focus.

The structure of the paper is as follows: We will begin the discussion with an analysis of the market of contemporary arts to establish why it is a suitable context for the study. The section focuses on the importance of reputation and legitimacy in net entry, and the adaptation process involved. We will then identify possible benefits of Internet use in relationship activities in art markets. The focus is on issues of trust and what implications it may have in this particular context. Finally, we will sum up the findings and conclusions.

The characteristics of art markets and networks in art markets

The network approach on markets suggests that industries should be described as networks of intertwined actors (Möller & Wilson 1995). Relationships are created to exchange resources, material or immaterial, such as knowledge. These relationships within a network are not dyadic but create a “net” that includes several actors. Within network theories, various approaches exist. Here we have adopted an approach, which emphasises the relationships within a network and their embeddedness in the social context. Hence, network studies discuss and develop ideas in many ways similar to those developed by institutional approaches (see for example Salmi 1995). Håkansson and Snehota (1995) discuss how networks are created through individuals in companies and how actors are constrained in their choices by rules and norms, as in the institutional approach. Moreover, the role of trust and reputation is emphasised in creating and maintaining network relationships. (See also Salmi 1995, Easton & Araujo 1994).

In network creation the actors engage in a mutual adaptation process through which the actors gradually become to share similar values and norms. They may start to share similar technologies and ways of operating. Thus they may become more dependent on each other (Easton & Araujo 1994, Möller & Wilson 1995).

In the case of the art markets it has been found that the actors within the network share similar values and norms, and more specifically, a similar taste in art. The art taste seems to be the basis of relationship creation in many cases within the art field. Moreover, it needs to be emphasised that within the art field the relationships are usually both social and business by nature and they often are based on friendship rather than primarily originating from pure business aims. Within the contemporary art market networks are overlapping, consisting of various networks starting from quite small nets around one gallery and extending to large loose international networks. (Jyrämä 1999).

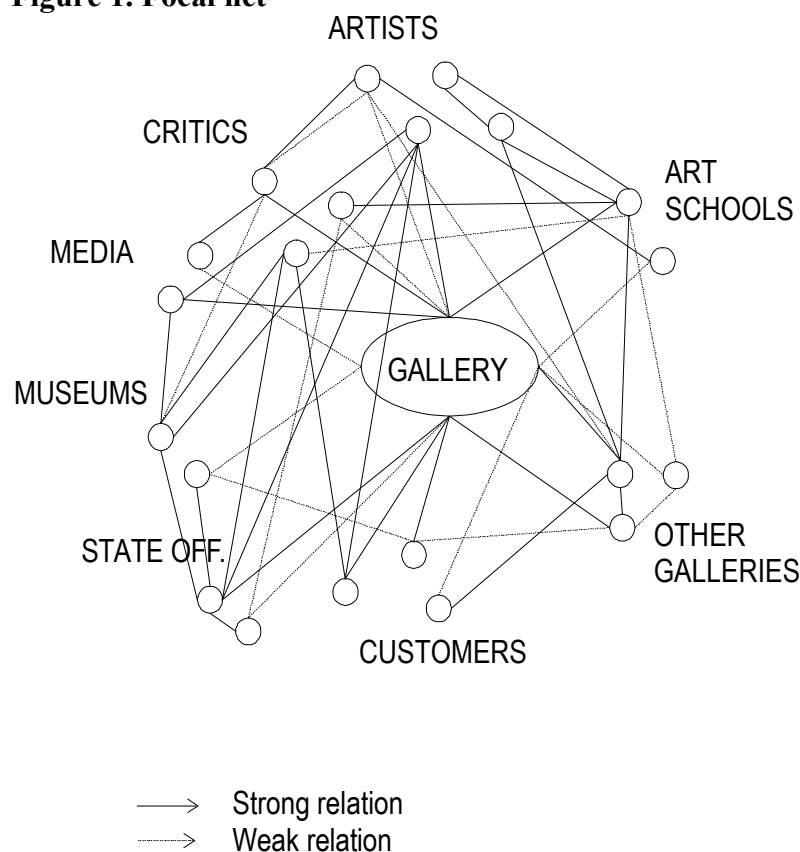
Networks are often studied from the point of view of a focal firm, its direct and indirect relationships. The notion of a focal net has been introduced by some researchers. For example, Salmi (1995) defines a focal net as a “unit of analysis, (which) is a net of direct and indirect interorganisational relationships that the focal

firm perceives as affecting its (eastern) business”. In this study the focal net is perceived as a net of key relationships for an art gallery.

Thus, the focal net consists of actors around one gallery: artists, collectors, other galleries, and art critics and other experts interested in the exhibition programme. The focal net here implies the smallest basic network structure, where the relationships are strong and contacts occur on regular basis. For example, on the level of the focal net the actors meet regularly and they all perceive themselves belonging to a gallery. The relationship is not formal, but is based on personal relations and implicit acceptance by other actors from the field of “belonging”. The creation of a relationship and adding new actors to the network seem to occur mainly through personal contacts. Often the galleries follow an artist’s work for years before adding him/her to the gallery’s focal net. Also, the opinions and recommendations of focal net members are listened to when changing the network structure. Thus, personal face-to-face contacts are preferred when creating the networks.

Figure 1 shows the relationships between the actors in the market of contemporary arts.

Figure 1. Focal net



The art markets are characterised by high uncertainty. This stems mostly from the uncertain value of works of art. A piece of art as a material object has little value by itself. The appreciation is created through interaction; that is, the actors in the market must form a consensus on the value of an artist’ creations. It is based on the art works’ immaterial aspects, such as art experience and artist's name and fame. Even the status of being an artwork is created trough the interaction among the art world’s actors (for more discussion see e.g. Danto 1995, Moulin 1992, Jyrämä 1999, Sagot-Duvaureux

1992). Thus the status of artwork or its quality is impossible to determine objectively. It is created among the actors. Because of the role of interaction in value creation, it is vital for a gallery to gain access to the network. Outside the net, it would have little influence on value. Only through participating a gallery can influence the value of artwork and what is considered as art. The social nature of the value creation process; its volatility to trends and perceptions of key experts makes the art field especially uncertain and emphasises the role of creating networks.

Legitimacy and reputation in network creation

Building relationships requires profound knowledge of the partner. This is particularly important if the market is characterised by uncertainty.

When the network approach is combined with the institutional approach, the role of common norms and values is emphasised (e.g. Salmi 1995, Jyrämä 1999). The role of these underlying beliefs and values have been found to be important in the ways galleries operate and how they create network structures (Jyrämä, 1999). Networks can then be used **to create legitimacy and reputation**. The ability to create legitimacy within a network usually involves personal relationships between the key actors. This presence aspect is important in almost any industry (Möller & Wilson 1995, 81). Yet it can be argued to be of utmost importance in the case of arts where high uncertainty exists and where the actors need first to establish good reputation and legitimacy within the field in order to enter the core or the elite - the international art scene (Jyrämä 1999).

For example, a young gallery needs to emphasise its innovativeness and exhibition programme by continuously creating new relationships. An established gallery, on the contrary, can rely on its reputation and established relationships, and even present artists by appointment only. Moreover, an established gallery's reputation reflects on the reputation of its chosen artist. Hence, it needs to do less convincing on its taste and choices than a young gallery. A young artist will somewhat automatically gain reputation and fame by being chosen by an established good gallery. The art world relies on the already established and accepted taste of the gallerist, whereas in the case of the young gallerist, reputation needs to be earned through creating good career paths for their artists.

Moreover, the role of reputation and references by valued others is important in entering any network (Jyrämä 1999, see also Becker 1982, Bourdieu 1985). In our study, the actors emphasised that they would never engage in activities with galleries whom they would not know or have a recommendation from someone known. Similarly, Håkansson and Snehota (1995) propose that a firm's previous relationships and reputation influence its ability to enter any new network.

In the creation of networks, personal relationships and trust seem to be important, especially in the context of the art field. As found in other studies, firms gradually adapt to each other and through this adaptation, can become dependent on each other (Möller & Wilson 1995). Similar development can be found from the gallery focal nets; e.g. the artists are dependent on the galleries and vice versa (Jyrämä 1999). During this adaptation process the firms or the actors become to share similar values, norms and beliefs.

In a recent study (Jyrämä 1999) art market actors emphasised the importance of following the field and being part of the information network. Most of the information travels along informal word-of-mouth routes. Hence, social occasions and discussions and informal relationships between the various actors within the field were perceived as being very important in creating accepted norms, conventions, beliefs, and values that are the basis of relationships in networks.

Method

In order to capture the nature of these markets, and as the use of Internet within the art market is a novel research field; an exploratory and descriptive research approach is needed. Thus, a qualitative approach was chosen in this study. The validity of the research was strengthened by triangulation (e.g. Patton 1990). Multiple sources of data were used; for instance, interviews, observation and references to existing studies.

The data gathering process of this study was done in two different sets. First set includes mainly interviews from four national markets, which were chosen to represent different sizes and different stages of maturity of the contemporary art market: The Finnish and the Swedish markets represent small and less developed, and the French and the British markets large and mature markets. This data is part of a larger study on the contemporary art market. From the Finnish market altogether 24 interviews were included in this study. 17 interviews were conducted in Sweden, 19 in France, and 10 interviews and one group discussion in the United Kingdom. In the second phase three additional interviews were conducted in France to interview galleries relating to Internet use. Moreover, questions relating to use of the Internet in relationship activities were sent to the interviewed galleries with email addresses in all four countries. The aim of the additional interviews and questions was to highlight some aspects that were not yet understood based on previously collected data. The aim was to acquire a broader picture of the phenomena studied, as is the aim of qualitative studies: to acquire multiple views of the object of study. Thus, the purpose was not to gather additional data for statistical generalisations.

The data analysis is carried out along the research topic. The aim is to discover a broad understanding of the phenomena studied. Various sources of data were used to give insight to the topic discussed. Also references to existing studies are used. The similarities and differences between Finland, Sweden, France and United Kingdom are searched somewhat, but the aim is not to conduct strict cross country comparison, rather the different countries were chosen as examples of differing contemporary art markets.

The external validity, the ability to generalise the findings or the correlation of the researcher's findings with other similar studies, was ameliorated by comparisons to existing art market studies when possible. However, generally the findings in qualitative research are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes (Yin 1989).

Drivers of Internet use in art galleries

Many galleries already use the Internet for some form of relationship activities. According to our results, galleries are most likely to use the Internet for acquiring information on other actors in the market, i.e. market research and competitor surveillance. Information acquisition on new trends and prominent artists has become more cost efficient and expedient with the Internet. Also, the exhibition lists of almost all major galleries in European art markets are available on the Internet. Galleries can more easily keep up to date with the market situation in other markets as well.

Information exchange is a key type of relationship between actors in any market (see e.g. Cannon & Perreault 1999). As we noted, the role of information exchange may be even more emphasised in art markets. An important part of the gallery's communication traffic concerns its artists, other galleries, and critics. In less uncertain markets, the use of the Internet has provided businesses with enormous efficiency advantages. Great savings in travel and communication costs have been reported elsewhere. On the Internet, interaction is free from many of the physical difficulties involved in the real world (see also Benghozi and Paris, 1999, Abecassis and Benghozi 1999).

The influence of new technology, especially the use of the Internet in the network adaptation process is of interest here. Quelch and Klein (1996) have suggested that much of the current expansion in Internet use is driven by marketing initiatives – providing products and product information to customers or distributing information to the company's employees. An increasing number of art galleries have established some sort of online presence. Although most seem to be in the “ornamental” stage (Geiger & Martin 1999) in terms of their Web sites, quite a few are also using the Internet for relationship activities (see also Uusitalo 1999).

For an art gallery, the benefits associated with online ordering, purchasing, payment, and delivery currently do not justify the risks and difficulties associated with them. Acquiring a piece of art requires physical inspection of the item. This is because each work is unique, involves often risk, and because the computerised representation of a painting does not come close to the original. Also, in most of the galleries, the purchase frequency of works of art is quite low. Online distribution might be more promising for the lower-ticket items in art markets, such as exhibition posters and post cards. On the other hand, customer service is an important objective for online activity in many markets. Providing customer assistance for e.g. technical products through the Internet can in many cases yield significant savings. In the art markets, after-sales support is often not really an emphasis. There is an implicit norm in the system that art buyers' and collectors' expertise in art and handling of works of art should not be questioned. Thus, although there might be demand for after-sales services to aid e.g. placement of paintings in the home, this might not be perceived acceptable.

Because of the highly network-oriented nature of the business, even a gallery small in size may have a large international network of contacts. The Internet has proved quite useful for a number of galleries in our sample. However, many of the galleries were rather reluctant on using the Internet for anything.

Table 1 lists possible approaches to use of the Internet in relationship activities in art galleries. We focus on artists, other galleries, and critics.

Table 1. Benefits of the Internet presence of an art gallery for relationship activities

Focus	Objective	
	Creating new networks - no prior relationship exists	Maintaining previous relations - established relationships exist
Artists	Greater reach than through other media - useful for international networks	lower time and monetary costs - useful in routine activities
Other galleries	Greater reach - useful in acquiring new allies, and in gathering information on other actors	efficient way of sharing timely information, especially to a large network
Critics	Greater geographical reach, unobtrusive way of communicating	efficient way of communicating of upcoming events

The opinion of galleries and art field actors concerning the benefits of new technology seem to be divided. Some galleries do use email and the Internet to pass on information to key opinion leaders, and also use it as a means to acquire information. Some are more reluctant and do not see the new medium as beneficial. The most prominent actors in taking art markets online have been the industry-level organisations (see Internet links at the end of the paper).

Although, as the Table shows, new media provides benefits for relationship marketing, difficulties also exist. First of all, most galleries throughout Europe are rather small in size. According to our data, many galleries do not perceive that their relational needs would necessarily require use of the Internet. The established patterns of network creation and maintenance are rather fixed for quite a few of the older and more conservative galleries.

It is interesting to note that the **artists** seem to be more active in their use of the Internet than the galleries. Most of the galleries in our data had had several contacts made by artists who were presenting themselves via Internet. Yet, the galleries did not perceive this as a beneficial way for artists to promote themselves and most preferred finding new artists for their galleries via more conventional ways, i.e. from art school exhibitions or through recommendations from their network members (see also Benghozi 1998)

Most of the studied galleries who had online activity used the Internet for maintaining current relationships. Gallerists used the Internet equally often to talk to artists, other gallerists, and critics. The content of these interactions were equally often business matters, social affairs, or passing information on current events.

However, although those galleries that reported using the Internet did so at least daily, they seldom reported having gained new relations through the new medium. On the other hand, most of the gallerists did use the Internet for acquiring information on

other galleries, museums, and artists, but did not initiate the relationships through the medium. We will next focus on interpreting the results.

Difficulties in using the Internet for relationship activities

New technology provides businesses with efficient ways of acquiring and transmitting information. It is already evident that the new forms of communication replace personal face-to-face communications to some extent. Some concerns have been voiced on whether the impersonal character of the Internet can actually replace the social aspects of interaction (Ylikoski & Oksanen 1999). Nevertheless, it is important to identify the implications of these phenomena for network management.

In addition, it can be emphasised anew that the previous reputation of the gallery (as sender of information) also plays a role. For example, a gallery would engage in relationships only with galleries that they either personally know or have received information or recommendations from other actors within their own network (Jyrämä 1999). This tendency may influence the gallery's willingness to engage in relationships via Internet as well. That is, it might engage in a new relationship only if the other actor is known to some of its own networks' actors, or if it has a good reputation among e.g. internationally known artists/galleries. This might imply to the relationships with customers as well.

It has been proposed that the Internet would be a good way to reach the opinion leaders in a market (Nicovich & Cornwell 1998). As the art markets operate a lot through personal contacts and through establishing reputation, the role of key individuals or gatekeepers is emphasised. It is beneficial for a gallery to keep the opinion leaders informed via email or the Internet site. In the case of the art markets, the opinion leaders are often key critics.

It is also noteworthy to realise that due to differences in art itself the attitude towards new media may vary. The galleries that were the first to adopt the use of the Internet were ones that presented new multimedia forms of art. Thus, the type of art the gallery represents, which often goes along the age of the gallery (Jyrämä 1999), seems to influence the attitude and willingness to use Internet.

We consider it likely that the Internet may become more useful as a tool when the actors share similar positive attitudes towards new media. For example, an art critic specialised in new art forms, e.g. Internet art, CD ROM art etc. would supposedly have a positive attitude towards information in this format. However, an art critic specialised in e.g. paintings could find the material less interesting and might reject the poor quality of reproduction of paintings in electronic form.

Research indicates that the success of a gallery depend on its reputation and status, both of which are formed in relation to other actors in the market. This limits the activities that galleries can perform. One of the art markets' key feature is that the value of the works of art is created through the interactions of the actors (e.g. Jyrämä 1999, Rouget et al 1991), as was noted. This makes the issue more complex. Although communicating through email and the web are lucrative from an operating cost point of view; they also imply increased uncertainty through reduced face-to-face contact.

This is where the trust issue may become insurmountable. Cost savings, greater reach, and possible corporate image advantages notwithstanding, the Internet may involve such downsides that its adoption is hampered. Galleries may perceive the new medium as a threat to the conventional and accepted methods of creating value: in art fairs, through the reputation of galleries. We will next discuss some trust and reputation related issues in art galleries' Internet activities.

Trust issues in using the Internet in relationship activities

The role of trust and reputation has been found important in the creation of network structures within the art field (Jyrämä 1999). Similarly in other fields the adaptation process between firms creates trust (Easton & Araujo 1994). Yet the notion of trust is not self evident, it includes various aspects and cannot be defined unambiguously. Easton and Araujo (1994) point out that stability and the prospect of continuing relationships offer the background to foster trust.

Yet, some recent studies indicate that co-operative activities are antecedent of trust and not vice versa (Anderson & Narus 1990 in Möller & Wilson 1995, Goldberg 1998). Therefore, in order for trust to be created and fostered, the relationships need to be built up. As in any relationship this process needs continuing communication and gradual getting to know each other (Goldberg 1998). The use of the Internet as a means of communication becomes then of interest.

The interaction between the participants of a communication on the Internet is defined through the presence of technology (Iacobucci 1998). The ways in which actors interact over the information network is currently dominated by the available technologies. The gallery can create a web page that displays images of its current exhibition, e.g. to increase the number of interested visitors. It should be noted that art is rarely sold based on communication alone. Internet activities (WWW, email) are complements to the physical art exhibitions. This is unlikely to change in the near future, at least as long as technology does not provide means for accurate representation.

The influence of differing cultures

Goldberg (1998) suggests that the success of online business depend on trust building. Because there is no face-to-face contact and no previous knowledge of the other participant, trust is critical. Trust is based on a perception of shared values and beliefs, which are reflected in the interaction between actors. An important part of enhancing trust in online activity is to understand the culture of the Internet.

Nicovich and Cornwell (1998) argue that a culture specific to the Internet can be identified. It exhibits the three common features with other cultures: 1) it is learned, 2) it serves as a barrier between members and everything else, and 3) it facilitates the social relationships between members (ibid.). What does the "Internet culture" mean? First of all, it has identifiable boundaries in terms of community norms and beliefs. Nicovich and Cornwell argue that these are only determined through interaction and discourse - in other words, no visible signs exist.

These common norms affect what is perceived acceptable and what is not. Examples of counter-norm activity on the Internet are abundant. These typically lead to overwhelming counter-reactions and negative publicity. Thus, the Internet culture limits the activities and the ways in which the activities can be performed.

It is interesting to note that the art field as such has a very distinct way of operating, its proper rules, norms and values. Hence it creates a culture of its own. When galleries use the Internet they bring along their very distinct culture, e.g. the way of operating and talking about art. There are several rules on how to present and talk about art (Jyrämä 1999, see also Becker 1982, Bourdieu 1985). These norms and rules may not go along the distinct way of talking and acting that is inherent in the Internet culture. This seems to be an important impediment for the adoption of Internet use in more conservative galleries. They seem to perceive the Internet as “them”, “not us”, “not for us”, because of the cultural clash.

When a gallery engages in using the Internet their “home” culture meets the culture of the Internet. As in any meeting of two different cultures there are bound to be differing norms, values, and ways of conduct. Moreover, the galleries cannot control nor know the host culture of the recipients, it may be the culture of the art world – or it may as well be any other possible culture. Therefore, there are various occasions where misinterpretations may occur, which then may cause mistrust between the actors. The art galleries have not yet developed the skills to know the Internet culture, as indicated by the low knowledge and use of discussion groups, chat, and other forums about art within the Internet. This is also evident in the distrust towards artists presenting themselves to galleries through the new media. As mentioned earlier, the galleries still prefer getting to know their artists personally, and seem to trust most recommendations for their own network actors rather than engaging in activities based on Internet contact only.

Yet it can be argued that as the actors become more familiar with the Internet culture and learn to adapt their host culture to it, communication and creation of trust can be achieved through new media as well.

Conclusion

An increasing number of art galleries in the market of contemporary arts have initiated some form of online presence or are planning to do so. We have looked at the various benefits that Internet use provides in relationship-related activities in this field. However, the particular features of these uncertain markets bring on some difficulties that may impede the use of new media.

The works of art gain their value through interactions between the actors in the market. A gallery must be “in” the system in order to have influence on other actors. This has led to long-lasting processes of socialisation, through which new contacts emerge and networks evolve.

Currently, the uncertainty in the market leads to caution – which can be seen in the importance of personal contacts, recommendations, and knowledge sharing. Many of the benefits of the Internet thus involve contradictions, because the use of the Internet

also involves reduced personal contact. This leads to difficulties in trust: who can be perceived trustworthy?

Another important impediment to Internet use is related to different cultures. The actors in the art market perceive a cultural clash between the culture of the Internet and the culture of the art world. This is less evident in the galleries that are active in new forms of arts that already involve computers. It may also reflect different subcultures within the arts domain. On the other hand, our results do not show significant differences between the Internet use of galleries in different national cultures. The differences of galleries are greater within markets than they are between markets. These issues could be investigated in further research.

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Web links

<http://www.newexhibitions.co.uk/>

(United Kingdom)

<http://www.immediate.org/gme/>

(France)

<http://www.artnet.se/>

(Sweden)

<http://www.galleriat.net/>

(Finland)