

# **AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF END-USERS' INFLUENCE IN THE PURCHASING PROCESS OF TRUCKS**

Giuseppe Pedeliento, University of Bergamo (Italy) giuseppe.pedeliento@unibg.it

Daniela Andreini, University of Bergamo (Italy) daniela.andreini@unibg.it

## **ABSTRACT**

During the last 40 years several studies investigated which organizational actors are more influential in industrial buying processes and decisions. In spite of the growing interest on the topic, empirical efforts focused on the influential role of end-users in business contexts are in short offer, especially if compared to the number of studies focused on purchasing personnel. This paper contributes to this debate by focusing on trucks and truck drivers. Through qualitative in depth interviews to sales persons and truck buyers, we uncovered a number of individual and organizational factors affecting drivers' participation throughout the purchasing process of new trucks. Findings show that users' influence is tightly linked to company size and that users' expectations are basically related to aesthetic and non utilitarian product attributes. Drivers participation to the purchasing process emerges as a form of personal reward and as an organizational benefit that companies use to retain employees in the long run and to reduce the turn-over rate. Managerial implications are suggested for both trucks' buyers and suppliers.

**Keywords:** buying behavior; purchasing process; users; influencers; trucks; truck drivers

## **COMPETITIVE PAPER**

**Track:** Supply Chain Management and Purchasing

# **AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF END-USERS' INFLUENCE IN THE PURCHASING PROCESS OF TRUCKS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Individual and organizational buying behavior and respective purchasing processes are traditionally considered as different phenomenon (Webster & Wind 1972; Sheth 1973; Lilien & Wong 1984).

The prevailing literature supports the need for a different approach when looking at organizational and consumer buying behavior primarily because of the number of actors involved in the purchasing process and their influential role (Johnston & Bonoma 1981; Lilien 1987; Lehmann & Winer 2005). As Lehmann and Winer (2005) posit, although in every purchasing decision - including both industrial and consumer goods and services - several agents are at play (initiator, influencer, decider, purchaser and user), a clear identification between buyer, user and purchase influencers is determinant in marketing business-to-business products.

Hence the idea that studying the purchasing agent is not enough (Weigand 1968) is well established in industrial marketing research, theory and practice.

Even though the literature abounds in studies aimed at analyze the role that purchasing agents and top managers play in organizational buying processes and decisions (Silk & Kalwani 1982; Lewin & Donthu 2005), studies primarily focused on the influential role of end-users are comparatively in short offer. As noted by Celuch et al. (2007) industrial manufacturers often lack - or have very limited - knowledge of their end-users.

Despite scholars seem to be supportive of the influential role that end-users hold in the purchasing process of industrial products (Johnston & Bonoma 1981; Silk & Kalwani 1982; Berkowitz 1986; Tanner 1998; Howard & Doyle 2006), the motives behind their participation and influence have not been deeply explored in the extant literature.

The end-users influence on organizational buying has been primarily analyzed by focusing on the degree of novelty of the product to be purchased (Robinson et al. 1967; Doyle et al. 1979; Cardozo 1980; Naumann et al. 1984; Crow & Lindquist 1985; McWilliams et al. 1992; Ferguson 1979; Bellizzi & McVey 1983; Mayer 1983; Jackson et al. 1984) and throughout the different phases of the purchasing process (Johnston & Bonoma 1981; Lilien & Wong 1984; Naumann et al. 1984; Dadzie et al. 1999; Garrido-Samaniego & Gutierrez-Cillan 2004).

To this matter, prior research found that end-users are influential in earlier phases of the purchasing process and are interested in those product's attributes which allowed them to perform their job at best.

Other motives instead which can prompt end-users participation and influence, such as products self-expressive benefits, products emotional traits and product aesthetic which were found to influence also industrial purchasing decisions (Mudambi 2002; Wolter et al. 1989; Yamamoto & Lambert 1994) and which were claimed to deserve more consideration by industrial marketing scholars (Wilson 2000) were not taken into account in previous studies.

In addition to this, another gap can be identified in the current literature: the major part of the contributions on organizational buying, are focused on large manufacturing organizations (Silk & Kalwani 1982; Mudambi & Schründer 1996; Wilson 2000) and do not offer sufficient empirical insights on other form of organizations such as small-medium enterprises and family owned companies (Wilson 2000; Ellegaard 2006, 2009) although company size was revealed as an important contingency in previous studies (Bellizzi 1981).

As a result, we still have limited knowledge of small company purchasing (Ellegaard 2009).

Given the gaps briefly displayed above, the aim of this study is threefold.

First, to investigate the influence of end-users in organizational buying processes by shedding light also on product attributes other than delivery, installation, efficiency, serviceability, etc. which are considered as the main product requirements for end-users (Sheth 1973).

Second, to identify the influence of organizational size on end-users participation and influence in the purchasing process of business products.

Third, to identify in which phases of the organizational purchasing process, end-users are more or less influential.

To answer these research questions we focused on the purchasing process of new heavy trucks, by involving truck buyers (mostly company owners/entrepreneurs) and sales persons working for truck manufacturers.

Findings show that the influence that end-users (i.e. employed truck drivers) can play is tightly linked to company sizes and that their expectations are basically related to aesthetic and non utilitarian product attributes. Drivers participation to the purchasing process emerges as a form of personal reward and as an organizational benefit that companies use to retain employees in the long run and to reduce the turn-over rate.

Trucks offer an interesting research setting: even though being capital equipment they suggest a high level of collegiality in purchasing decisions (Bradley 1977; Jackson et al. 1984), their relative low level of technical complexity (Klein, Crawford & Alchian 1978; Nickerson & Silverman 2000) would suggest a low level of users' involvement (e.g. Kotteaku et al. 1995; Lehmann & O'Shaughnessy 1974; Laois & Muschuris 2001).

Furthermore, the research is conducted by focusing on a market (the Italian) in which micro and small prevail over big companies (Ministry of Transportation 2004).

Hence, it offers an interesting research context to shed light on the influence of firms' size in determining higher or lower levels of users' participation throughout the purchasing process of business products (Lilien & Wong 1984; Wilson 2000; Bellizzi 1981; Silk & Kalwani 1982).

The remainder of this article is structured as follow: first, the prominent theoretical and empirical literature on industrial purchasing behavior and organizational buying processes and decisions is reviewed, by emphasizing those contributions in which individuals' influences were analyzed; second, the main features of the empirical setting in which the research has been conducted are illustrated; afterward, the research method is described and the main results are shown. Finally, conclusions, managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research are provided.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Individuals' influences in industrial purchasing**

The prevailing marketing literature on industrial purchasing, gives support to the idea that in order to succeed in business-to-business markets, selling firms must possess a deep understanding of customer firms' buying behavior (Johnston & Lewin 1996). In the words of McQuinston (1989, p.66), «the primary objective of business marketers is to discover who participates in the industrial purchase decision and the factors that affect the interpersonal influence between the participants during the decision».

Earlier contributions on industrial purchasing, proposed general models capable to be applied to all types of industrial buying decisions (Robinson et al. 1967; Webster & Wind 1972; Sheth 1973). The establishment of these general models gave birth to a wide academic interest in organizational buying behavior (Sheth 1996) and favored the proliferation of studies aimed at providing empirical confirmations or disconfirmations of the underpinning normative propositions on which they rely upon.

As Johnston and Lewin (1996) pointed out, given their general nature, these models (i.e. Robinson et al. 1967; Webster & Wind 1972; Sheth 1973) fail to capture all of the variables that allow to predict organizational purchase behavior and respective outcomes.

In particular, a major resistance to the generalizability of these models relies is the acknowledgment that «no two buying decisions in any given company are likely to be exactly alike, nor will any two companies follow exactly the same procedures in even highly similar purchase situations» (Johnston & Bonoma 1981, p. 146).

The role of individuals in particular has been assumed as one of the main sources of heterogeneity in industrial buying (Sheth 1973; Webster & Wind 1972).

As Webster and Wind (1972) outlined in the conclusion remarks of their paper, research efforts should be directed toward the individual rather than toward the abstract organization, since the individual is the center of buying processes and decisions.

However, a review of the literature to date still confirms what Silk and Kalwani (1982) wrote about 30 years ago: there is little or no consensus on who is the most influential party. In fact, even though it is quite easy to identify who participate in any given purchase situation, it is quite difficult to understand their dynamics and power relationships (Johnston & Bonoma 1981).

This difficulty can be partly explained by acknowledging that the influence of organizational actors varies according to individual factors that characterize the purchase situation (Jackson et al. 1984).

Hence, by acknowledging that a general/generalizable theory of industrial buying is unrealistic.

To this matter in fact, is not a chance that a review of the empirical contributions focused on individual's influences in industrial purchase decisions and processes reveals "a variety of inconsistencies" (Lewin & Donthu 2005, p. 1384).

For example, while some authors gave empirical support to the idea that individuals' participation varies according to the type of purchasing situation (Robinson et al., 1967), i.e. straight re-buy, modified re-buy and new task buy (e.g. Doyle et al. 1979; Cardozo 1980; Naumann et al. 1984; Crow & Lindquist 1985; McWilliams et al. 1992), others failed to give support to the influence of purchasing novelty on individual's participation (e.g. Ferguson 1979; Bellizzi & McVey 1983; Mayer 1983; Jackson et al. 1984).

A variety of factors have been underlined as enablers or constrainers of individuals' influence on industrial purchasing such as their formal/informal position and their relative level of power within the organization (Ronchetto et al. 1989; Venkatesh et al. 1995), organizational size (Bellizzi 1981), time pressure (Kohli 1989), environmental uncertainty (Spekman & Stern 1979) and the importance of the purchase (McQuiston 1989; Reve & Johansen 1982; Johnston & Bonoma 1981).

The level of participation and influence in industrial buying processes has been also found to vary throughout the different stages of which the industrial buying process is composed by (Johnston & Bonoma 1981; Lilien & Wong 1984; Naumann et al. 1984; Dadzie et al. 1999; Garrido-Samaniego & Gutierrez-Cillan 2004).

In particular different actors are at play in each phase of the industrial purchasing process, i.e. need recognition, establishment of specifications, supplier search, vendor evaluation and supplier selection (Kotteaku et al. 1995).

However, most of the studies aimed at shedding light on individuals' influence in industrial purchasing processes give particular emphasis on purchasing personnel while giving few attention to other organizational actors (Silk & Kalwani 1982; Lewin & Donthu 2005).

To this matter, Silk and Kalwani (1982) noted that being available research on organizational purchasing mostly concerned with highly structured, large-scale organizations and being this organizations more difficult to penetrate for research purposes, empirical contributions are

generally focused on professional purchasing staff and on managerial figures and tend to underestimate the role played by other organizational actors (users at first) and differences existing between large corporation and SMEs.

### **The role of end-users in industrial buying processes and decisions**

In spite of a wide academic interest toward individuals' influences in organizational purchasing, there is an aspect that seems to be under-researched if compared to others, and deals with the role held by end-users. As noted by Celuch et al. (2007) industrial manufacturers often lack or have very limited knowledge of their end-users.

The major part of research aimed at investigating end-users' influence in industrial purchasing, focused on the role they play in each of the steps by which industrial purchase processes are composed of. To this matter prior empirical research have shown that end-users are more likely than non-users to initiate the purchase and that their influence wanes in further stages of the decision process (Johnston & Bonoma 1981; Lilien & Wong 1984; Naumann et al. 1984; Berkowitz 1986; Tanner 1998; Dadzie et al. 1999; Garrido-Samaniego & Gutierrez-Cillan 2004).

Thus, end-users play a key role at the "need recognition" and "establishment of specifications" stages, while their influence drops in the last three stages, i.e. "supplier search", "vendor evaluation" and "supplier selection" (Garrido-Samaniego & Gutierrez-Cillan 2004).

In particular it is often assumed that end-users are more likely to participate in earlier phases because they are primarily interested in obtaining certain product specifications and performances which can help them to perform their job at best (Berkowitz 1986; Tanner 1998; Töllner et al. 2011).

As stated by Sheth (1973), organizational actors put different expectations in industrial purchasing processes and decisions. End-users look for prompt delivery, proper installation and efficient serviceability while purchasing agents look for maximum price advantage and economy in shipping and forwarding (Sheth 1973).

However Martin et al. (1988) fail to give support to this claim. In comparing buyers and users expectations concerning different service attributes of different transportation modes, they unveiled that there are no differences between buyers and users. For both groups, core service attributes - satisfaction of customers' requirements, dependable transit time, consistency in service, low freight charges and equipment availability – were considered as the most important attributes.

Dadzie et al. (1999) instead, in studying the impact of end-users influence in organizational buying of high technology logistics automation software, found a great role played by end-users in the adoption of new logistic technology and found different criteria to be salient in deciding the adoption of new technologies. Logistics personnel consider customer service improvements and service availability as the most important attributes while senior management stressed service availability and cost of equipment. Logistics users in turn gave less emphasis on costs than senior managers do.

Thus, also in this case results drawn in prior empirical observations show several inconsistencies and are far from providing general rules concerning end-users influence in industrial purchasing.

In particular prior studies gave partial explanations of users influences since they considered a narrow set of selection criteria consisting of some core product attributes, such as time delivery, efficiency, serviceability, costs, innovativeness, etc. (Sheth 1973; Dadzie et al. 1999), while neglecting other aspects such as self-expressive benefits, aesthetics and/or emotional traits of industrial products which were found to be important selection criteria

also in business context and that can affect end-users' level of participation in purchasing processes (Wolter et al. 1989; Yamamoto & Lambert 1994; Wilson 2000; Mudambi 2002).

Hence – when focusing on the product - the set of individual expectations and their attempt to influence the organizational purchase decisions are expected to be not only related to the product itself, or to its degree of novelty/innovativeness, but to encompass also the meanings that the product has for industrial end-users.

Thus these variables deserve to be taken into account when issues of individual influences in organizational purchasing are investigated.

Furthermore, previous research found that the influence that end-users can play in industrial buying decisions is tightly linked with organizational size. Bellizzi (1981), by focusing on construction materials purchasing, found that the greater the company's size, the more purchasing decisions are decentralized. On the contrary, the smaller the company, the more purchasing decisions are taken by individuals holding apical positions.

Research focused on purchasing orientation of small companies owners revealed that buying decisions are highly centralized and taken by the entrepreneur him/herself (Ellegaard 2009).

Given the gaps previously identified, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the influential role that end-users play in the purchase decisions of business-to-business goods, by shedding light also on those non utilitarian product attributes which can influence the users' participation to buying decisions (Wolter et al. 1989; Yamamoto & Lambert 1994; Wilson 2000; Mudambi 2002).

## **THE EMPIRICAL SETTING**

The product truck and the truck market were chosen as a suitable research setting for investigation. Trucks offer an interesting research setting because even though being capital equipment they suggest a high level of collegiality in purchasing decisions (Bradley 1977; Jackson et al. 1984), their relative low level of technical complexity (Klein, Crawford & Alchian 1978; Nickerson & Silverman 2000) would suggest a low level of users' involvement (McWilliams et al. 1992; Kotteaku et al. 1995; Lehmann & O'Shaughnessy 1974; Laois & Muschuris 2001). Yet, in spite of this, as previous studies found out (Andreini & Pedeliento 2013) trucks' end-users have a high degree of involvement in the product category that is supposed to affect purchasing choices.

Last, but not least, as Wilson (2000) sharply noted, given the aforementioned prevailing focus on large manufacturing companies, the literature still lacks sufficient empirical insights on family owned and/or small-medium enterprises and on other business context that cannot be framed within the traditional manufacturing paradigm (service providers at first). To this matter the trucking industry offers some interesting stimuli to enlarge the domain of study.

The trucking industry in fact is often cited as a unique context given the predominance of self-employed drivers who contract with motor carriers (Nickerson & Silverman 1999) and the prevalence of micro-small over large companies.

In Italy for example, according to the last census of the Ministry of Transportation (2004) the average fleet size is five trucks while big companies (those with a fleet greater than 50 trucks) account just for 0.9 per cent of the total. Thus Italy represents a valuable context to investigate if and how firm's size affects the influential role that end-users can play.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In order to analyze if and how truck drivers (end-users) affect the purchasing process of new trucks and to unveil the main organizational and environmental forces which enable them to be influential, the authors opted for a qualitative approach throughout one-to-one interviews (Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Since this study is exploratory in nature and since its main aim is to investigate experiences as a first person account, the authors decided to qualitatively approach the problem (Hair et al. 2003). In particular interviews were conducted on the supply side (trucks sellers) and cross checked investigating also truck buyers (generally companies' owners), since focusing on both demand and supply is considered a suitable research design to enrich the understanding of organizational purchasing behavior (Ronchetto et al. 1989).

This choice was also taken to reduce possible sources of biases. As suggested by Silk and Kalwani (1982) research on industrial purchasing influences is affected by self reported biases that make research results questionable and unreliable. Hence we decided to gather data on both the demand and the supply side with the precise aim to reduce biases implicit in the data collection. For the same reason we decided to do not involve end-users.

As far as the suppliers side is concerned, we interviewed 42 sales persons equally divided by brand (six interviews for each of the seven brands selling heavy trucks on the European market, i.e. in alphabetical order Daf Paccard, Man, Mercedes Benz, Renault Trucks, Scania and Volvo Trucks).

On the demand side instead we interviewed people working for trucking companies who declared to be responsible for trucks' purchasing (company owners and purchasing personnel). Trucking companies involved in the study were chosen on the basis of the number of trucks composing the freight using the same dimensional classes applied in the last census of the Italian Ministry of Transportation (2004): i.e. up to three trucks; from four to 10 trucks; from 11 to 50 trucks; more than 50 trucks.

Trucking companies were chosen assuming the number of trucks as the only criteria regardless of the brand(s) owned. Four interviews for each of the mentioned clusters were collected. Of the 16 informants, 14 are company owners and only two informants are purchasing managers (one in the 11-50 class and another in the class composed by companies with a fleet greater than 50 vehicles).

The interviews for both groups of informants (truck sellers and trucking companies) was composed by a set of questions aimed at investigating if and how truck drivers affect the purchasing decisions of new trucks and to understand which individual and organizational factors determine their relative level of participation. In particular questions were set up in order to unveil if end-users exert influence in the choice of the supplier brand, of the specimen and of product's attributes as well as to find out if self representational motives of trucks, products aesthetics and other product's meanings affect the drivers' willingness and ability to participate to buying decisions. The interview's canvass was the same for both groups of respondents and did not follow a rigid grid.

Personal interviews were conducted during 2012: each interview lasted for averagely thirty minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, content analyzed and codified within 24 hours (Yin 1989). The work gave rise to about 200 pages of field notes and interviews' transcriptions (single spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt, A4 format). Interviews transcripts were analyzed with an interpretivist rather with than a positivist approach: non-quantifying methods were used, yet, qualitative data are treated as autonomous body of knowledge and participant narratives are utilized to grasp a richer understanding of that which is to be investigated (Granot et al. 2012).

## RESULTS

Findings reveal that end-users are influential actors throughout the purchasing process as well as that their influence is tightly linked to company's size. In general, the smaller the company, the greater the drivers' influence. Thus, on the contrary, the role that drivers can play diminishes as companies' sizes become greater. As previous scholars suggested, individuals' influence in business to business purchasing is strictly linked to company size (Bellizzi 1981; Wilson 2000). Bellizzi (1981), found that the greater the company size, the more purchasing decisions are decentralized. Findings drawn in the truck context instead show that the greater the company size, the more the decision is taken by top management actors, while the smaller the company the more purchasing decisions are taken collectively and end-users' stakes are taken into consideration.

As far as sales persons is concerned, informants are concordant that company size is the main organizational factor by which the role of the end-user is dependent. No differences between brands were found. In the words of a sales person working for a Man dealer:

*«In companies with a truck fleet composed by three or four trucks, owners and employees sit down on a table and decide which truck to purchase. In bigger companies instead drivers are simply numbers and their voice is never heard. The entrepreneur is the decision maker and no one else can say anything».*

And a Volvo Truck vendor said:

*«In small companies drivers are highly influential while in big companies the driver is absolutely marginal. This is a relevant characteristic of the Italian market: since the major part of trucking companies are small we have to take into account both the entrepreneur and the driver. In other markets instead the negotiation process and the negotiation content are drastically different».*

The accounts of buyers are in line with the results displayed above: thus in smaller companies drivers actively influence buying decisions while in bigger companies drivers tend to be passive spectators of decisions undertaken by others.

As declared by the owner of a fleet with about 100 trucks: *«In small or family owned companies the driver is the boss. In our company all the drivers are the same and we choose the trucks that cost the less»*

What is particularly interesting - and surprising - is that the major part of sales persons and buyers affirmed that in several cases end-users are allowed to participate to the purchasing process as a form of personal reward or as a sort of benefit. As a Daf salesperson declared:

*«Often truck drivers are directly involved in the purchasing process and in the buying decision of the new truck they will drive because the boss would like to reward him/her. In most cases, the most beautiful truck of the fleet is not driven by the company owner (if he is a driver himself) but by the driver he or she considers as the best or the most trustworthy driver of the company. I saw drivers saying 'No, I would never drive that truck' and the entrepreneur bending his back».*

And a Man seller adds:

*«In some cases the company's owner involves drivers throughout the purchasing process, such as in the choice of the brand, of the specimen, of the engine, of the number of horse power, etc. to increase the drivers' working conditions. The unwritten rule is 'I will buy you the truck you want and - in exchange – you don't bother me when you have to work two hours more'».*

The same finding was obtain on the demand side:

*«If you buy a new truck, you try to award the employee who works for you since a long time. If you would give a new truck to a new comer or to someone that is in the company since a short period of time, it will be a disaster because people will start to think that you don't respect them. Most of the drivers are as such because they are in love with trucks. If you are a good boss you have to understand this and behave accordingly»*

Drivers' voice is also heard as a way to retain them. Previous studies focusing on occupational issues in the trucking industry (Taylor 1994; Min & Emam 2003) noted that trucking companies are increasingly struggling with difficulties in retaining qualified drivers. Even though they found some organizational variables predicting drivers' loyalty, they did not take into account the truck as a possible source of retention. Thus some companies leverage on drivers' participation to trucks' purchase decisions as a way to increase their loyalty. A Volvo sales person recounts:

*«Nowadays to find a reliable driver is very difficult. Trucking companies have an incredible turn-over and this is very costly for them. When choosing a truck some employers give their employees free reign to retain them as long as possible. Recently I had an experience with a small company and the driver told me: 'I want this truck with these characteristics and these accessories and I don't want to know anything about prices. For prices deal with my boss but this is the vehicle I want'».*

The owner of a small company with two employees said:

*«When I bought the last truck I spent 700 Euros just to buy some particular lights that the driver would like to have. You know I please him with something he desires so that if he have to work for a couple of hours more he doesn't bother me. I have to please my employees because is getting harder and harder to find good drivers. In bigger companies the boss says: 'this is the truck and have a nice trip!'»*

Differently from the results reported by Ronchetto et al. (1989) the formal rank and the departmental membership seem to do not be relevant factors in determining higher or lower levels of involvement of end-users in purchasing processes in small trucking companies. On the other hand, informal factors - such as the extent to which organizational actors are centrally located in the buying system and the hierarchical distance between the focal individual and the decision maker - are the main elements from which the end-users' influence stems from.

Accordingly, the smaller the company, the greater the power of end-users and the greater the influence they can play in purchasing decisions. In bigger companies instead where hierarchy is more formalized and formal rank and departmental membership assume a greater

relevance, end-users are not involved in purchase decisions and are not allowed to be member of the purchasing process.

What needs a deeper understanding concerns the reasons behind the drivers willingness to participate to the purchasing process and the nature of the stakes contended. As previously argued, individuals have different expectations and individual expectations are assumed to be of central importance in organizational buying (Sheth 1973; Webster & Wind 1972).

We have thus expressly asked informants which expectations entrepreneurs and drivers put in the purchasing process of new trucks.

Results unveil that entrepreneurs (i.e. the actual buyers) are basically interested in “hard” product features. According to Sheth (1973) they are fundamentally interested in prices, guarantees, financial conditions, etc., while drivers are much more interested in self-representational features of the truck, in aesthetics aspects and in other elements that go beyond utilitarian and/or work related features.

As a Daf sales person said:

*«Drivers and entrepreneurs have completely different expectations: drivers are interested to the brand prestige, to the truck’s physical appearance, to the accessories package, etc. Entrepreneurs instead look at the price, fuel consumption, efficiency, post-sales services, etc».*

This result is in line with findings drawn by Yamamoto and Lambert (1994) who found that aesthetic product properties have a positive influence on people’s preference even in industrial contexts. Consequently as the author pointed out - product’s aesthetics can act as a factor enhancing the desirability of that product. However in the experiment they performed they chose products that although express different levels of sophistication, cannot be considered as highly experiential (especially if compared with trucks). Furthermore, even though the impact of product appearance was stable across organizational units and for people of different technical orientations, end-users where not taken into account.

However, different expectations of buyers and users have important consequences for trucking operators. Even though – as argued above - allowing end-users to participate to the purchasing process and to hold an active role in buying decision can be a way to retain drivers in the long run, this can lead companies to take economically inconvenient decisions. (at least in the context here investigated). As a Man vendor argued:

*«If you let a driver to decide, the choice criteria are completely different. Consider this simple example. For a driver a good truck is the one that goes fast in uphill roads. But this truck is perhaps the worst investment for the company because has certainly high fuel consumptions. We have just sold 120 trucks to a company and we have computed that they can save up to 15,000 Euros a year if a truck can travel a meter more with a liter of fuel. For a fleet of 120 trucks the total saving amounts for 1.8 million Euros. Or again, drivers go crazy for sun visors, but sun visors worsen the aerodynamicist of the truck and increase fuel consumption of approximately 100 Euros per month. Try to figure out how much money a trucking company can save just avoiding a stupid accessory like a sun visor».*

While a Mercedes Benz vendor affirmed:

*«When we deal with the driver during the negotiation phase we emphasize aesthetic more than utilitarian product features while when dealing with the entrepreneur we stress financial conditions, durability, assistance, etc. Entrepreneurs want products with low prices, low consumptions, that never broke, and that they can pay as later as possible».*

On the buyers' side an entrepreneur said:

*«Always, when I buy a new truck I have to struggle with my employees. They do not understand that trucks for me are working tools. Me too, I like lights, colors, leather sits, premium cabs, but I have to worry of the bills at first and I cannot afford their requests»*

Interviews transcripts unveil that non core product benefits are the main elements that drivers take into consideration when they are allowed to take part to the purchasing process of new trucks. Entrepreneurs instead are more interested in core attributes such as fuel consumption, durability, reliability, re-salability, guarantees, financial conditions etc. Wolter et al. (1989) for example have shown significant differences in how buyers and designers evaluated emotive or nonfunctional product attributes.

In the truck context aesthetic and non core product attributes assume such an exasperated importance for users that drivers are even willing to diminish their personal welfare as long as they can drive the truck they want and desire. As a vendor says:

*«Some drivers desire so much a certain kind of truck that they are willing to reduce their salary as long as their boss buy him/her the truck he/she wants to have».*

Another relevant issue investigated concerns the influential role hold by end-users across different buying decisions. Consistent with the prevailing view in the literature (see e.g. Kotteaku et al. 1995; Laios & Xideas 1994; Woodside & Samuel 1981; Bellizzi 1981) industrial purchasing processes are composed by four different phases - initiation, search, selection and completion – to which different tasks and decisions are associated. Role, responsibilities and influences are distributed among the different actors that are involved in the buying decision as members of the buying centre (Johnston & Bonoma 1981) according to their relative power (Ronchetto et al. 1989). Findings drawn in previous (Leigh & Rethans 1985; Tanner 1998) indicated that end-users are influential both in the initiation phase and in further steps and decisions such as the determination of the general characteristics of the product needed, the determination of final specifications and post-purchase decisions. However end-users were found to be more influential in initiating the purchase while their influence wanes in further stages of the decision process (Laczniak 1979; Leigh & Rethans 1985; Berkowitz 1986; Tanner 1998). Also in the context here investigated end-users were found to be more influential in the initiation phase than in subsequent steps and choices of the purchasing process.

In particular results suggest a greater role of users in the choice of the specimen and of product features (e.g. technical characteristics of the engine, interior design, accessories, etc), rather than in the choice of the brand.

The choice of the brand is generally hold by top management figures or by entrepreneurs while drivers can be influential in the choice of the product and of its technical and aesthetical characteristics.

*«Drivers can be influential in the choice of the specimen and of the accessorizes package while the choice of the brand always pertains to the boss because is a strategic decision. Different brands offer different services, different levels of assistance, different financial solutions, etc. and – in many cases - a long lasting relationship between the brand and the company. Drivers always tend to make pressure on the boss to obtain as much accessories as possible and engines as much powerful as possible. The boss in turn is more concerned with costs and prices and will tend to choose cheap products and minimal equipments. We always need to find a right balance between their requests».*

Concerning possible influences of drivers in the choice of the brand – however – also in this case relevant differences can be found between small and big companies. A Daf dealer said:

*«In dealing with small companies very often happens that the entrepreneur expressly says ‘sorry I would have bought a Daf but the driver felt in love with another brand and I was obliged to please him/her’. In bigger companies this never happens».*

However, none of entrepreneurs and other informants responsible for heading the purchasing of trucks interviewed declared to take into account drivers when choosing a brand.

Finally, if – as previously argued – drivers are influential in general and any significant difference can be found between brands, sales persons accounts revealed that end-users’ attempts to influence the choice of the brand largely depend on the brand image. Thus drivers try to persuade their superiors to buy more expansive and more prestigious trucks because of the self-representational significance of the brand.

To this matter a Scania sales person declared:

*« We have some clients that use our brand to attract employees. We can say that very often drivers are willing to gain less money to drive the brand they want. Some entrepreneurs say ‘I have never bought a Scania before but I need one to give a prize to a driver. He deserve one’ ».*

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to extend the understanding concerning the influential role of end-users in the purchasing process of business to business products by investigating the relevance of product attributes other than those traditionally considered in previous studies (Sheth 1976). Although the literature on the topic of industrial buying processes and behavior is wide (Johnston & Lewin 1996), a review of the main contributions to date revealed that studies aimed at shedding lights on how and in which circumstances end-users are influential are in short offer. The reasons behind this academic myopia can be partly explained by considering that the majority of the empirical investigations available to date are focused on traditional large manufacturing companies (Wilson 2000) in which just purchasing agents and managerial actors are considered (Silk & Kalwani 1982) while scant attention has been directed toward other actors.

To this aim we chose the truck and the truck market a suitable research setting and we investigated both buyers and sellers. This gave us the opportunity to paint a more insightful

picture of the phenomena under study. End-users were not involved to avoid possible biases emerging when individuals' influential power is self reported (Silk & Kalwani 1982).

Findings drawn in this paper partly confirm and partly disconfirm the conclusions reached by similar previous investigations, and allow to identify additional motives which prompt users' to participate to industrial purchasing decisions.

First of all drivers were found as to be influential actors of the purchasing process of new heavy trucks. This result is in line with other studies in which is clearly stated that purchasing decisions of capital items are rarely taken individually. However, although trucks are capital goods (are hence assumed to be purchased involving a several actors - Bradley 1977; Jackson et al. 1984) the interviews conducted revealed that the nature of the product itself does not affect the degree of collegiality of purchasing processes. End-users' ability to influence buying decisions was found to be mainly related to company's size: in particular the smaller the company, the greater the influence that end-users can play. On the contrary, the bigger the company, the more the decision processes is headed and controlled by top management actors (mostly by the entrepreneur him/her self). Thus, differently from previous literature (Bellizzi 1981), results suggest that small companies are those in which end-users have a greater degree of influence.

Research findings unveiled some interesting intra-organizational motives behind end-users' involvement in purchasing decisions that – to the best of our knowledge – have never emerged in previous research efforts.

End-users are allowed to participate to purchasing processes as a form of personal reward and/or as a way to retain them in the long run. Thus, their participation was found to be somehow related to a form of company's welfare policy and can be compared to an individual benefit.

Good drivers can be prized allowing them to take part throughout different phases of the purchasing process and this is an actual leverage employers use to increase the employees' loyalty and to reduce the turnover rate. According to these results, users' participation cannot be considered as a mere enactment of power within the organization and does not deal with individual formal positioning along the organizational hierarchy (Ronchetto et al. 1989).

Rather, can be considered as a form of exchange between end-users and decision makers in which different stakes and different expectations are brought by actors involved. The reasons behind such an intense willingness of drivers to take part to buying decisions can be explained by considering the great importance that the product has for users. Trucks are highly experiential products toward which users nurture intense feeling of attachment (Andreini & Pedeliento 2013). As a result, drivers have relevant stakes in buying decisions that go far beyond utilitarian motives. Differently from what stated by Sheth (1973) in his general model, users are not just interested in task-related product features (such as delivery, installation, serviceability, etc.). Rather are much more interested in non-task product features which deal with the self-representational content of the product and with product's aesthetic and pleasantness.

Differences in expectations between users and buyers were found as possible sources of conflicts between individuals which require to be carefully identified and balanced. Consistent with interviews transcripts reported above, meeting users' expectations can undermine the firms' ability to recover its costs and investments as well as the economic efficiency of the product, while – in turn – when little or no attention to users' needs and wants is paid, turnover problems can raise.

Finally, end-users influences have been investigated across different intermediate decisions throughout the purchasing process. In line with previous research our findings support that end-users are influential in initiating the purchase while their influence diminishes in further decisions of the purchasing process (Laczniak 1979; Leigh & Rethans 1985; Berkowitz 1986;

Tanner 1998). We found out evidences that end-users are more influential in earlier phases of the purchasing process - such as the choice of the specimen, of technical characteristics, of the engine, of the interior design, of the accessories package, etc. – while are marginally influential in the choice of the brand.

The results reached in this paper allow to formulate managerial implications for both buyers and sellers. As far as the sellers' side is concerned, a greater involvement of end-users is suggested as a possible way to achieve a better competitive positioning, especially in markets characterized by the prevalence of micro-small over big trucking companies. Commercial and communicational strategies should hence be designed to appeal both buyers and users, balancing task and non task product related features and giving emphasis to aesthetic product appearance. Previous research in fact have shown that the aesthetic pleasantness of industrial products can be a relevant competitive factor (Yamamoto & Lambert 1994) and that emotive aspects can strongly influence purchasing decisions in business to business contexts (Wolter et al. 1989).

Nonetheless - as Yamamoto and Lambert (1994) noted - the degree to which aesthetics considerations gained importance in the industrial landscape remains a contested issue and industrial marketers put aesthetics ahead of usability. This paper unveils that in the trucks context, product's aesthetic is of great importance since it shapes users expectations.

Thus, leveraging on products' physical appearance can be an important source of competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* competitors especially in those markets (like the Italian) in which the structural characteristics of the demand, favor a grater users' involvement in purchasing decisions.

Gemser and Leenders (2001) suggested that when product technology begins to level out, product aesthetics can be a great source of differentiation and competitive advantage. In the truck industry in particular to leverage on the aesthetic content of the product can be a valuable path to achieve a better positioning since product quality and performance among brands is increasingly leveled.

The importance that the aesthetic content of the offering plays in shaping users' expectations hence, does not only deal with marketing efforts, but also with product development decisions and with the configuration of the product. In order to meet the demand of highly fragmented markets – since drivers and their expectations should be taken into account – trucks should be engineered as modular products that users can personalize and configure according to their personal taste. Some successful players for example owes part of their success to the adoption of modularization of their products (Persson & Åhlström 2006).

As far as the demand side is concerned, managerial suggestions are principally addressed to big trucking companies entrepreneurs: allowing drivers to participate to the purchasing process and giving them the chance to make decisions concerning the product configuration can be a leverage to increase their job satisfaction, to retain them in the long run and to reduce the risk of opportunism.

However, the results reached and the managerial implications highlighted, should be viewed in light of the constraints of the study. First of all, the product category investigated can be considered as a unique case in the heterogeneous landscape of business to business products. Similar investigation on other industrial products in fact will probably unveil a lower interests of end-users to participate in buying processes and decisions, a lower or non-existence relevance of less utilitarian product attributes, and the inconsistency of users involvement as a form of organizational reward and as a way to increase employees' loyalty.

Second, the single country focus and the unique characteristics of the Italian market strongly limit the generalizability of the research findings to other markets characterized by higher concentration rates. Additional studies are thus needed to investigate if users' expectations outlined in this article can be found in other industrial context as well as to evaluate nature

and intensity of drivers' influence (if any) in markets characterized by different structural conditions. Moreover, the assumption that allowing drivers to participate to the purchasing process can determine higher level of employees loyalty and a lower level of turnover, deserves to be deepened by means of *ad hoc* studies.

## REFERENCES

- Andreini, D & Pedeliento, G 2013, 'B2B vs. B2C. An Empirical Attempt to Bridge the Gap', *Mercati & Competitività*. Special Issue of the 28<sup>th</sup> IMP Conference, no. 1, pp. 75-98.
- Bellizzi, JA 1981, 'Organizational Size and Buying Influences', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 17-21.
- Bellizzi, JA & McVey, P 1983, 'How Valid is the Buy-Grid Model?', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 57-62.
- Berkowitz, M 1986, 'New Product Adoption by the Buying Organization: Who Are the Real Influencers?', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 33-43.
- Bradley, MF 1977, 'Buying Behavior in Ireland's Public Sector', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 251-258.
- Cardozo, R 1980, 'Situational Segmentation of Industrial Markets', *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 14, no. 5-6, pp. 264-76.
- Celuch, K, Goodwin, S & Taylor, SA 2007, 'Understanding Small Scale Industrial User Internet Purchase and Information Management Intentions: a Test of Two Attitude Models', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 109-120.
- Crow, LE & Lindquist, J D 1985, 'Impact of Organizational and Buyer Characteristics on the Buying Center', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 49-58.
- Dadzie, KQ, Johnston, WJ, Dadzie, EW & Yoo, B 1999, 'Influence in the Organizational Buying Center and Logistics Automation Technology Adoption', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 14, no. 5/6, pp. 433-444.
- Doyle, P, Woodside, AG & Michell, P 1979, 'Organizations Buying in New Task and Rebuy Situations', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 7-11.
- Ellegaard, C 2006, 'Small Company Purchasing: a Research Agenda', *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 272-283.
- Ellegaard, C 2009, 'The Purchasing Orientation of Small Company Owners', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 24, no. 3/4, pp. 291-300.
- Ferguson, W 1979, 'An Evaluation of the Buygrid Framework', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 40-44.
- Garrido-Samaniego, MJ & Gutiérrez-Cillán, J 2004, 'Determinants of Influence and Participation in the Buying Center. An Analysis of Spanish Industrial Companies', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 19, no. 5, pp. 320-336.
- Gemser, G & Leenders, MA 2001, 'How Integrating Industrial Design in the Product Development Process Impacts on Company Performance', *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 28-38.

Granot, E, Brashear, TG & Motta, PC 2012, 'A Structural Guide to In-Depth Interviewing in Business and Industrial Marketing Research', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 7, pp. 547-553.

Hair, JFJ, Babin, B, Money, AH & Samuel, P 2003, *Essentials of Business Research Methods*. John Wiley & Sons: Leyh Publishing.

Howard, P & Doyle, D 2006, 'An Examination of Buying Centres in Irish Biotechnology Companies and its Marketing Implications', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 266-280.

Jackson Jr, DW, Keith, JE & Burdick, RK 1984, 'Purchasing Agents' Perceptions of Industrial Buying Center Influence: A Situational Approach', *The Journal of Marketing*, vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 75-83.

Johnston, WJ & Bonoma, TV 1981, 'The Buying Centre: Structure and Interaction Patterns', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 143-156.

Johnston, WJ & Lewin, JE 1996, 'Organizational Buying Behavior: Toward an Integrative Framework', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1-15.

Klein, B, Crawford, RG & Alchian, AA 1978, 'Vertical Integration, Appropriable Rents, and the Competitive Contracting Process', *Journal of Law and Economics*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 297-326.

Kohli, A 1989, 'Determinants of Influence in Organizational Buying: a Contingency Approach', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 50-65.

Kotteaku, AG, Laios, LGM & Moschuris, SJ 1995, 'The Influence of Product Complexity on the Purchasing Structure', *International Journal of Management Science*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 27-39.

Laczniak, GR 1979, 'An Empirical Study of Hospital Buying', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 57-62.

Laios, LG & Xideas, E 1994, 'An Investigation Into the Structure of the Purchasing Function of State-Controlled Enterprises', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 13-21.

Laios, LG & Moschuris, SJ 2001, 'The Influence of Enterprise Type on the Purchasing Decision Process', *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 351-372.

Leigh, TW & Rethans, AJ 1985, 'A Script-Theoretic Analysis of Industrial Purchasing Behavior', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 22-32.

Lehmann, DR & O'Shaughnessy, J 1974, 'Difference in Attribute Importance for Different Industrial Products', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 36-42.

Lehmann, DR & Winer, R 2005, *Product Management*. McGraw Hill.

Lewin, J E & Donthu, N 2005, 'The Influence of Purchase Situation on Buying Center Structure and Involvement: a Select Meta-Analysis of Organizational Buying Behavior Research', *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 58, no. 10, pp. 1381-1390.

Lilien, GL & Wong, AM 1984, 'An Exploratory Investigation of the Structure of the Buying Center in the Metalworking Industry', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 1-11.

Lilien, GL 1987, 'Business Marketing: Present and Future', *Industrial Marketing and Purchasing*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 3-21.

Martin, JH, Daley, JM & Burdige, HB 1988, 'Buying Influences and Perceptions of Transportation Services', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 305-314.

Mayer, WU 1983, 'Situational Variables and Industrial Buying', *Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 21-25.

McQuiston, DH 1989, 'Novelty, Complexity, and Importance as Causal Determinants of Industrial Buyer Behavior', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 66-79.

McWilliams, RD, Naumann E & Scott, S 1992, 'Determining Buying Center Size', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 43-49.

Min, H & Emam, A 2003, 'Developing the Profiles of Truck Drivers for Their Successful Recruitment and Retention: a Data Mining Approach', *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 149-162.

Ministry of Transportations, 2004, 'Indagine conoscitiva su 2.000 imprese che esercitano l'autotrasporto di cose per conto di terzi', Edited by Ipsos-Explorer on behalf of the Italian Ministry of Transportation: Rome.

Mudambi, R & Schründer, CP 1996, 'Progress Towards Buyer-Supplier Partnerships: Evidence From Small and Medium-Sized Manufacturing Firms', *European Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 119-127.

Mudambi, S 2002, 'Branding Importance in Business-to-Business Markets: Three Buyer Clusters', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 31, no. 6, pp. 525-533.

Naumann, E, Lincoln, DJ & McWilliams, RD 1984, 'The Purchase of Components: Functional Areas of Influence', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 113-122.

Nickerson, JA & Silverman, B 1999, 'Why Aren't All Truck Drivers Owner-Operators? Asset Ownership and the Employment Relation in Interstate For-Hire Trucking', *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 91-118.

Persson, M & Åhlström, P 2006, 'Managerial Issues in Modularising Complex Products', *Technovation*, vol. 26, no. 11, pp. 1201-1209.

Reve, T & Johansen, E 1982, 'Organizational Buying in the Offshore Oil Industry', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 275-282.

Robinson, PJ, Faris, CW & Wind, Y 1967, *Industrial Buying and Creative Marketing*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Ronchetto Jr, JR, Hutt, MD & Reingen, PH 1989, 'Embedded Influence Patterns in Organizational Buying Systems', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 51-62.

Sheth, JN 1973, 'A Model of Industrial Buyer Behavior', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 50-56.

Sheth, JN 1996, 'Organizational Buying Behavior: Past Performance and Future Expectations', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 11, no. 3/4, pp. 7-24.

Silk, AJ & Kalwani, MU 1982, 'Measuring Influence in Organizational Purchase Decisions', *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 165-181.

Spekman, RE & Stem, LW 1979, 'Environmental Uncertainty and Buying Group Structure: An Empirical Investigation', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 43, no. 2, pp. 54-64.

Strauss, A & Corbin, J 1990, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Tanner, JF 1998, 'Users' Role in the Purchase: Their Influence, Satisfaction, and Desire to Participate in the Next Purchase', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 479-491.

Taylor, GS 1994, 'The Relationship Between Sources of New Employees and Attitudes Toward the Job', *The Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 134, no. 1, pp. 99-110.

Töllner, A, Blut, M & Holzmüller, HH 2011, 'Customer Solutions in the Capital Goods Industry: Examining the Impact of the Buying Center', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 712-722.

Venkatesh, R, Kohli, AK & Zaltman, G 1995, 'Influence Strategies in Buying Centers', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 59, no. 4, pp. 71-82.

Weigand, LE 1968, 'Why Studying the Purchasing Agent is Not Enough', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 41-45.

Webster, FE & Wind, Y 1972, 'A General Model for Understanding Organizational Buying Behavior', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 12-19.

Wilson, DF 2000, 'Why Divide Consumer and Organizational Buyer Behavior?', *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 34, no. 7, pp. 780 - 796.

Wolter, JF, Bacon, FR, Duhan, DF & Wilson, RD 1989, 'How Designers and Buyers Evaluate Products', *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 81-89.

Yamamoto, M & Lambert, DR 1994, 'The Impact of Product Aesthetics on the Evaluation of Industrial Products', *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 309-324.

Yin, R 1989, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.