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**INNOVATIONS IN THE DISTRIBUTION
OF TOURIST PRODUCTS:
RESULTS OF A RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN ITALY¹**

¹ Although the paper was the product of collaboration among the authors, for the final draft Sciarelli Mauro wrote paragraphs 1 and 2, Celiento Giuseppe wrote paragraph 3 and Della Corte Valentina wrote paragraph 4.

1. Introduction: tourist product and its distribution process.

The distribution of tourist products is facing a considerable evolutionary process, characterized by significant and radical changes in the last decade. Next to the traditional distribution (travel agents), internet and multimedial channels have been developed in recent years: distribution in tourism industry, in fact, is defined as "multichain" nowadays.

Focusing attention on the evolution of the traditional form (travel agents), we have to take into account the role and importance of information and communication technology in the industry.

Tourist products have always been sold through travel agents. These usually were independent companies or units of multiple chains (such as Thomas Cook). Both cases show several advantages and disadvantages: more flexible, but strategically and financially weak the former, more rigid but better managed and organized the latter.

In a hypercompetitive sector like tourism industry, characterized by rapid changes in tastes, growing variety and variability in demand, global and highly information and knowledge-based competition, travel agents are facing a very difficult and complex scenario, where airline companies, tour operators and hotel chains tend to "disintermediate", leveraging on ICT opportunities. Besides, within the tourist industry, travel agents, apart from national or international chains, have always had a very low bargaining power. For this reason, small and medium enterprises in particular are seriously menaced.

Before analyzing the innovations in the distribution of tourist products, it is necessary to understand the meaning and contents of these kind of products.

There are different possible configurations that can be taken into account (Rispoli, Tamma, 1995) and can be synthetised as follows:

- 1) package solutions, where the different services (travel, accommodation, excursions, lunch, dinner, etc..) can be included at different levels: this is the typical situations where tour operators create the product, assembling the different parts according to a creative process (Della Corte, 2004, ch.1);
- 2) network products, where there is some kind of planning and interaction among the different companies in the industry, allowing to client to choose among a range of possible different combination of products;
- 3) point-to-point solutions, where the tourist creates his/her own product, buying each service singularly.

All these configurations coexist and can be sold both through the more traditional channel (travel agencies) or by multimedial channels. However, for companies it is important to promote the first two solutions, trying to create more value for the clients. The value for the client is given by the difference between the advantages he can get by acquiring the package rather than single services and the cost of getting it (that, in case of organized offer, has to be cheaper to have success on the market).

In our opinion, it's rather simplistic to think that internet will substitute the more traditional channel. Our aim is, in fact, to examine this topic deeply, in order to better understand the evolutionary process that is taking place in the distribution process itself.

It is rather difficult to think about the substitution of these immaterial aspects with technology. However, a severe selection process has been taking place in the last years. To respond to this situations networkings and partnerships seem to be a possible pattern that is worth analysing, with particular reference to:

- 1) networks' creation and development: different forms have been analysed, from the more traditional and structured forms to the new and "slimmer" ones;
- 2) partnerships, especially with regard to incoming initiatives (that is promotion of cooperation in offers that promote and sell destinations).

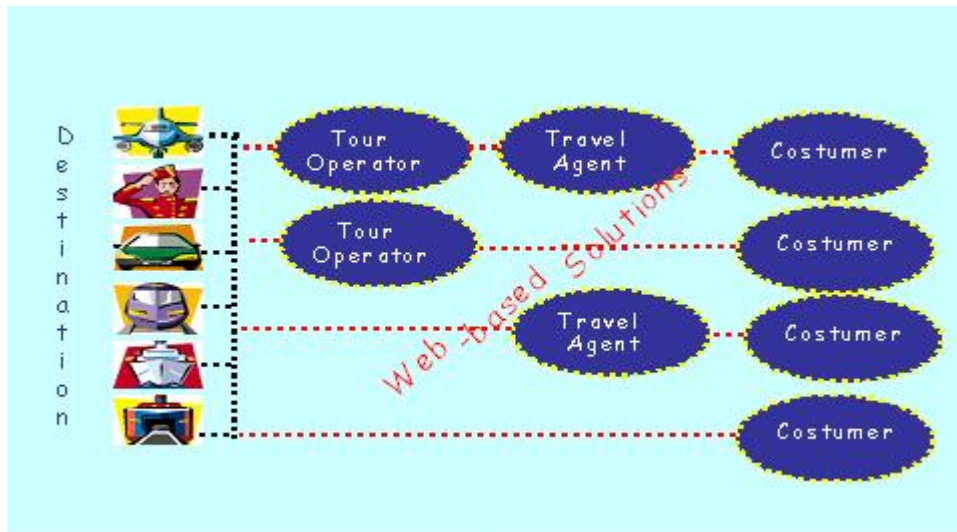
In countries where there are several small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (especially European Countries), the concentration process is developing more than direct investments, through inter-firm cooperations (networking and partnerships). In the paper we analyse a sample of 16 Travel Agencies (TA) networks, in order to get to some conclusions regarding strategic implications of some institutional and managerial choices. These forms of cooperation among firms differ a lot concerning the level of partners' autonomy from the leader and the creator of the network or of the partnership. In this paper we've been focusing on different variables that can specify networks and partnerships level of flexibility, in order to outline different types of configurations.

This paper is a result of a wide research project, conducted by the authors, that regards the analysis of the strategies of the different kinds of firms operating in tourism industry and of the relationships developed among them. The examined cases are Italian, even if they show some characteristics and interesting aspects in the analysis that allow to get to some interesting conclusions that, according to the authors, can be extended to inter-SMEs collaborations. Successively, we will go through an international comparison with similar companies in other country.

2. The impact of new information technologies in the distribution of tourist products.

Tourism industry has been affected by a growing uncertainty due to deep and rapid changes in demand, global competition and concentration (increasing process of acquisition by large firms), widespread deregulation in several connected industries (such as the airline industry, and the impact of the newcomers on competition), as well as the critical importance of ICT solutions both in b2b and b2c relations (Buhalis, Licata, 2002). Research in strategic management describes this process as "hypercompetition" (D'Aveni, 1994; Grant, Baden Fuller 2003). Most of these factors have an impact even on the distribution channel configurations and on the strategic behaviour of firms operating within the tourism industry (figure 1).

Figure 1
The production and distribution chain in the tourism industry



It is important to underline that the tour operator is a “producer” rather than a simple “seller” of tourist products (Rispoli, Tamma, 1996). It is also the “core company” that assembles the different single services of the complex product and, at the same time, is particularly involved in the distribution process, since its activity is particularly risky.

In general, there are different distribution channels for tourist products: from the long and indirect one to the short and direct one. ICT solutions are having a deep impact on all these configurations², influencing backward and forward vertical integration strategies, as well as disintermediation strategies or even different kinds of networking and partnerships.

Partnerships and networking can be seen as configurations that:

- facilitate uncertainty control;
- develop flexibility and rapid adaptation to external changes;
- support growth corporate strategies;
- defensive solution to industry competition based on the complementarity of resource sharing among partners.

Travel agencies aggregations are sometimes a competitive reaction against the disintermediation process that is supported by new technologies. Bill Gates founded Expedia.com believing that travel agencies would have disappeared because of the development of Internet. *As we can see, travel agencies are far from disappearing, but surely they are reorganizing in a different way and, at least for the more competitive companies, new information technologies often are much more an opportunity to catch than a threat to avoid.*

The scenario of tourist product distribution is complex. New firms leveraging on ICT are coming into this business, some of them as a result of a forward vertical integration strategy, some others as totally new competitors (Internet travel providers coming from ICT or communication industry). Newcomers are breaking the traditional rules of competition and have a deep impact even on the consumer behaviour. Consumer can skip the travel agent using internet to choose a destination, a tourist product, a hotel, an airline flight and to get in touch directly with suppliers.

The main reasons for the development of the different forms of cooperation among travel agencies can be found also by analysing the main promoters of the initiatives. It sometimes happens that these forms of aggregations are favoured by the tour operator itself, which creates the tourist

² To analyse the impact of ICT on travel agencies according to different points of view, see Law, Leung, Wong, 2004; Buhalis, Licata, 2002; Palmer, McCole, 1999.

product, and tries to build a sort of constellation system (Normann, Ramirez, 1995) around it, in order to get much more control of final demand and better plan its products' sales. This, as furtherly shown, can take place through different forms of aggregations (franchising rather than specific contractual agreements), allowing the tour operator to better govern and control distribution, reducing, at the same time, the risk of opportunism in transactions (Williamson, 1991) and reinforcing its brand and its products penetration on markets served by the aggregation.

In other cases, the aggregation process is started by travel agencies themselves (Sainaghi, 2002), in order to get more market power, both on the supply and on the demand side, in order to increase market share or develop, anyway, horizontal integration strategies. The extension and development of the aggregation therefore become strategic factors for the defense and/or growth of the entire network, compared with more direct web-based solutions that, however, are not "physically" connected to the territory.

These collaboration forms and configurations are resource and competence-based because they are primarily based on organizational competence sharing to develop products and complex systems.

They differ from direct investments formulas because they are by far more flexible and can be easily changed in the relations and in their forms. At the same time, a certain standardization of routines (Nelson, Winter, 1982) and general skills (promotional campaigns, lay-out schemes, information and control systems, communication flows) favours "repetition economies" and the development of "network economies": the resource sharing process plays a role of multiplier of know-how and learning (including error corrections in the monitoring process), for the perspectives and better development of common network strategies (Contractor, Lorange, 2002).

Moreover, for the single company that decides to be within the network, some advantages can be reached, differently very difficult to achieve by themselves: from interrelation economies (Gulati, 1998), to scale and scope economies. For newcomers, it can be an easy way to overcome entry barriers and quickly acquire some knowledge competences (know how, ICT, etc.) that otherwise would require much more time to be developed by the firm itself. Risks and costs sharing in the entrepreneurial process of the network are another strategic factor for similar forms of constellations (Hennart, 1988), that can refer to both the network's inter-firm organization process and its relations with external stakeholders (from tour operators, to single suppliers, to financial institutions, local and central Governments, etc.).

Consequently, specific commercial agreements, strategic alliances, and networks can be conceived as the different phases of a partnership's development process. These different stages are characterized by a growing degree of trust between the parts and a growing level of strategic resources and objectives interactions among partners.

In this perspective, the creation of network forms, such as franchising or profit sharing associations have, of course, also to face several organizational and operational problems, in the resources, skills and competences generating process. ICT, in this case, rather than represent a menace, can become a useful support tool to favour more rapid and efficient information flows within the network and between this one and the external context – first of all, the market.

Therefore, web-based solutions find space both in the disintermediation process as well as among the more traditional distribution channels in the industry, favouring the collaborative and/or conflictual potential in vertical relationships, especially between tour operators and travel agencies (Pencarelli, 2003).

Barney, in his book, underlines that in strategic alliances there are both incentives to collaboration and also possible opportunistic behaviours (adverse selection, moral hazard, hold-up). Of these aspects and the others above mentioned this paper tries to analyse the main characteristics.

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3. Main TA network configurations and relative characteristics.

As underlined before, the distribution of tourist products seems to be the activity, in the value chain of tourism industry, particularly menaced by new technologies and touched by hypercompetition. However, the changes that have been taking place recently show the persistence of “multichannel” choices even in the cases of tour operators or hotel chains that have been hugely investing on ICT³.

The traditional Travel Agents (TA) channel has known an important and significant evolutionary process that has deeply modified the structure of the whole distribution system in the sector (Paci, Romiti, 2003).

In particular, there is an evident concentration process due, as explained in paragraph 2, to the horizontal development strategies when promoted directly by TAs, or to vertical development strategies, when favoured by tour operators. This process took place at different times in Europe: it started early in Great Britain and Germany, followed by France and then Spain and Italy.

The different configurations that can be met in practice show a different level of strategic rigidity/flexibility, as well as a different coverage on the territory.

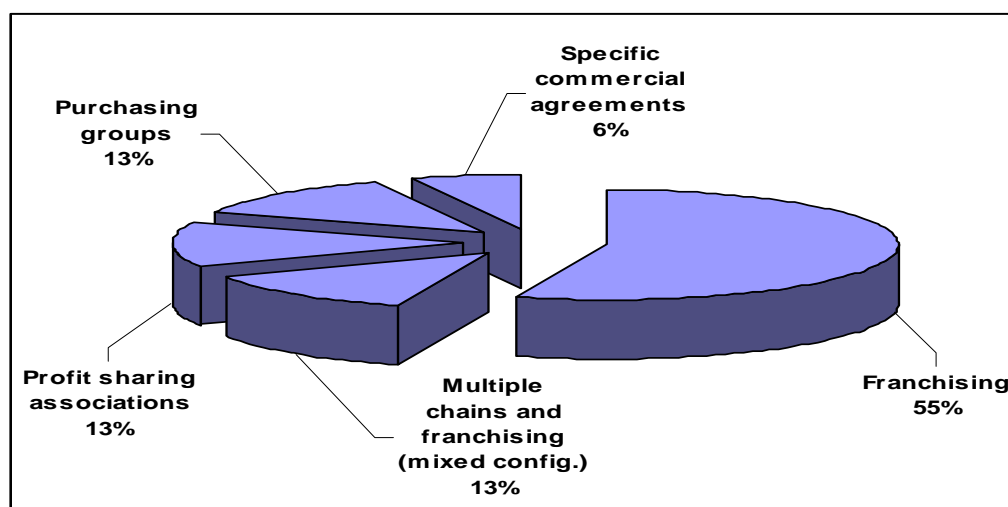
Apart from the cases of multiple chains, that usually refer to one specific company that manages all business units located in different areas of a country or more countries (if international, such as the first Thomas Cook), nowadays there are several forms of aggregations, with different features, whose study helps understanding modern dynamics.

Our research on field is based on the analysis of a sample of the main 16 TA aggregation cases existing in Italy, that show the following configurations:

- 1) Specific commercial agreements;
- 2) Profit sharing associations;
- 3) Purchasing groups;
- 4) Franchising;
- 5) Multiple chains and franchising (mixed configurations).

The cases show the composition indicated in figure 2: the majority is represented franchising (55%), followed by profit sharing association, mixed configurations and purchasing groups (13% of the sample each category), and a small percentage of specific commercial agreements⁴.

Figure 2
Main aggregation forms in the sample



³ This process is widely known as “disintermediation” (Iazzi, Rosato, 2003).

⁴ With regard to the last configuration, specific agreements have been considered with a minimal threshold number of affiliated TA and an extension in at least two regions.

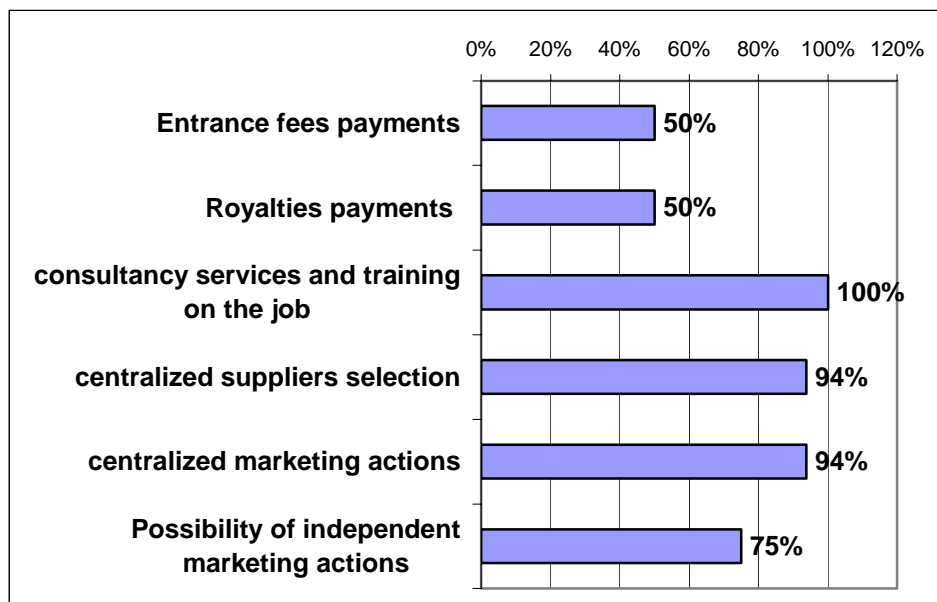
As pointed out, these can be analyzed according to the grade of flexibility/rigidity and the coverage of the territory (geographic extension index).

The first aspect has been measured according to different variables, that represent the main content of the affiliation processes:

- 1) entrance fees;
- 2) royalties payment;
- 3) business consulting and training on the job;
- 4) centralization of suppliers' selection process;
- 5) centralized promotional campaigns;
- 6) possibility of independent marketing actions.

In general, some variables seem to be present within the majority of the forms of aggregation, implying a higher correlation with the hypothesis of aggregation compared with individual solutions (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Main content variables in the aggregation forms examined



In figure 3 it is therefore clear, through a comparison among the different percentages, that networking is mainly connected with business consulting and training on the job, the centralization of suppliers' selection process and of promotional campaigns. Less relevant appear other variables, such as entrance fees and royalties payments, as well as independent marketing actions.

Going deep into the analysis per cluster, however, it comes out that the variables that change more significantly according to the type of aggregation form, are:

- a) the possibility of independent marketing actions (fig. 4);
- b) royalties payments (fig. 5);
- c) entrance fees payments (fig. 6).

Although the different configurations of partnership are similar in the possibility for each member to start independent marketing actions (generally equal to 100%), nevertheless it has been noticed a different degree of control and coordination of these single actions within the chain, much stronger in profit sharing associations and in some franchising networks.

Figure 4
Possibility of independent marketing actions

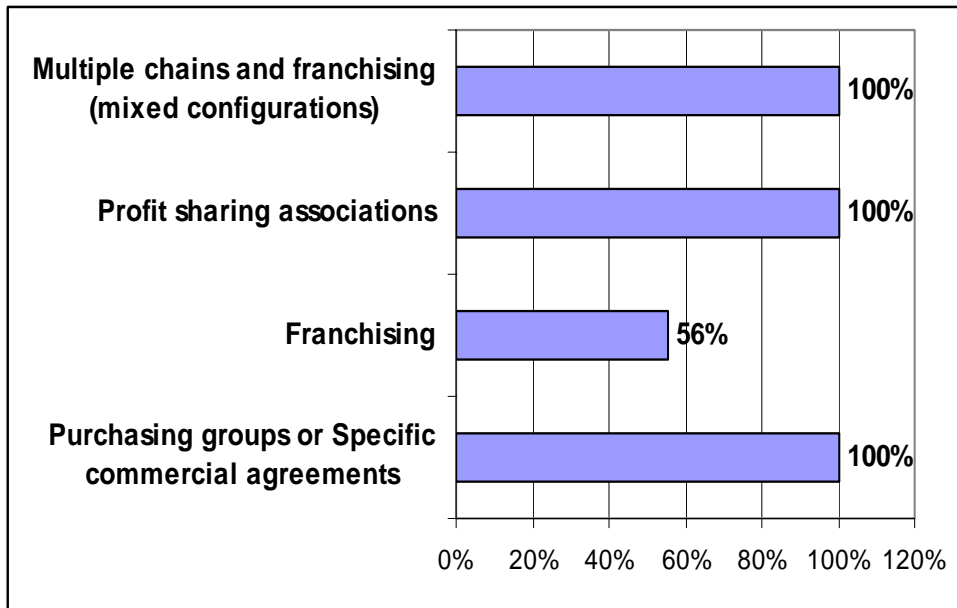


Figure 5
Royalties payments

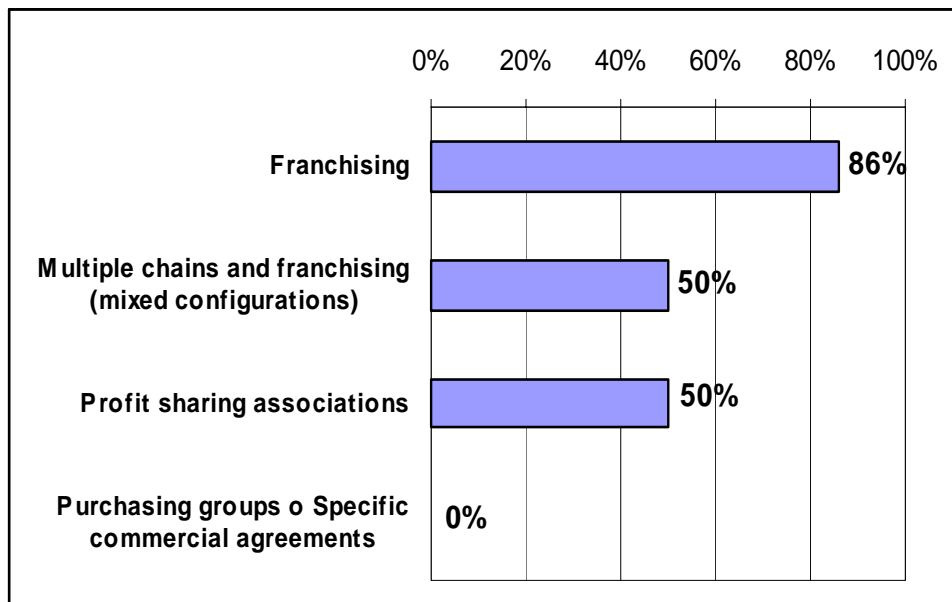
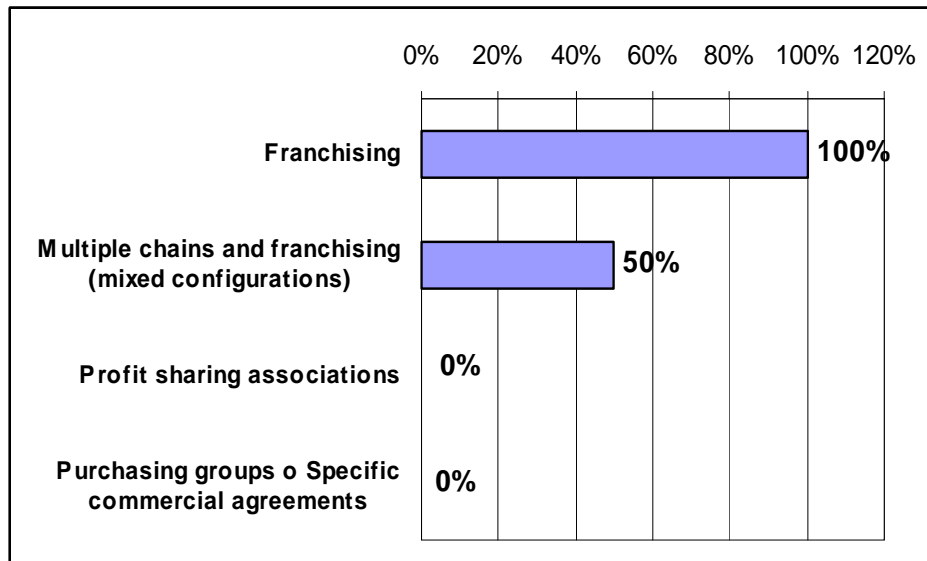


Figure 6
Entrance fees payments



In literature, an explanation for the structure of royalties and initial fees in relationship franchising has been proposed, hypothesizing that the fees and royalties are positively related to the franchisor's fraction of intangible asset and negatively related to the franchisee's fraction of intangible assets⁵ (Windspenger, 2001).

Considering that the principal components of intangible assets of a network retailing are the brand name of the franchisor and local market know how of the franchisee, the results of our empirical analysis (figures 5 and 6) confirm this with regard to some specific forms. They in fact show that negative relationship, because royalties and initial fees are asked from the "more structured" configurations, which prefer to associate only or mainly start up firms.

On the contrary, strategic goals of purchasing associations, that are generally brought about by already operating companies, that are well established on the territory, are mainly bound to the objective of reaching scale economies, both in supply and in the selling process.

In a multiple chain or within a franchising network the main goal, both for single participants and the network itself is intangible resources (know-how, brand image, the group commercial competences) sharing.

The analysis of each form of aggregation has conducted to the identification of two main clusters: 1. more structured aggregation forms (franchising and mixed forms - fig. 6); 2. less "structured" aggregation forms (fig. 7 and fig. 8).

⁵ This relation can be found in any kind of partnerships and networkings that provide entrance fees and royalties payments.

Figure 7
Cluster n. 1: More "structured" aggregation forms.

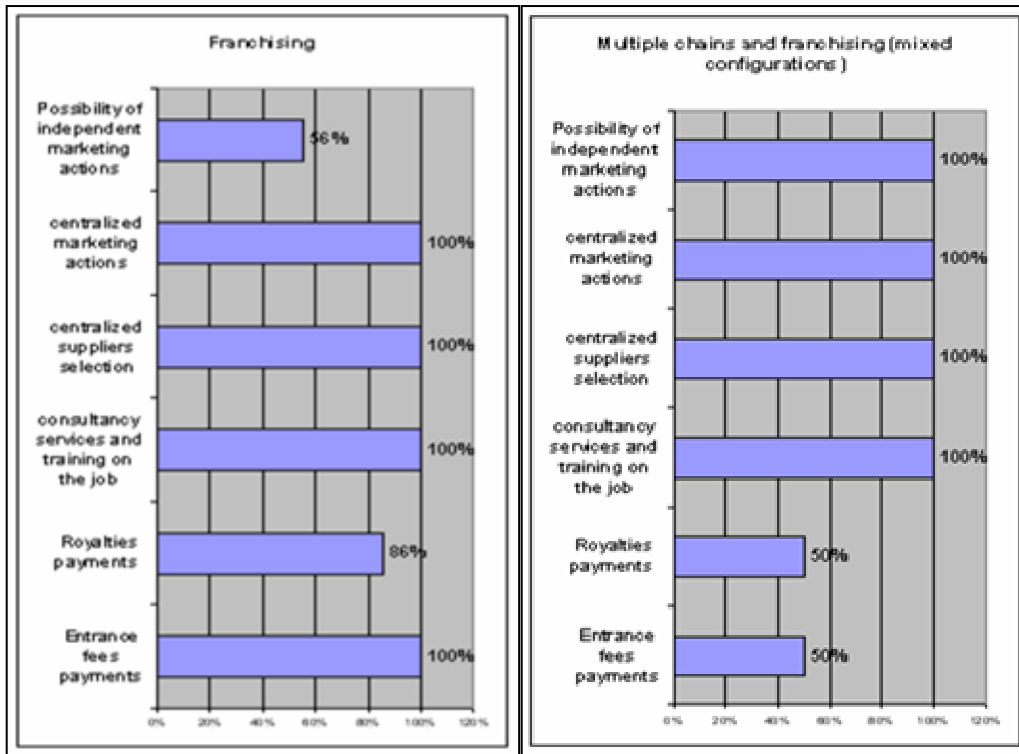
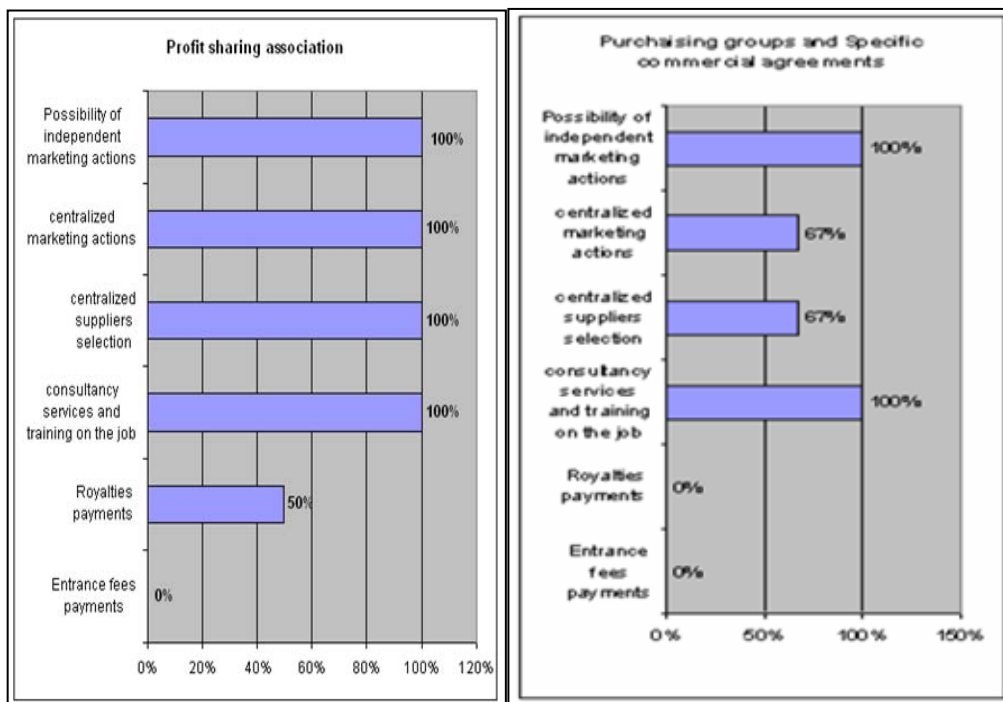


Figure 8
Cluster n. 2: Less "structured" aggregation forms.



Although profit sharing associations have been included in cluster n.2, they can be considered an "intermediate" aggregation form, since they show some characteristics that are typical of both more structured and less structured configurations. It shows in fact low percentages of the "entrance fee payments" and "royalties payments" variables as well as purchasing groups and specific

commercial agreements and the high percentages in "centralized marketing actions" and "centralized suppliers selection" as well as multiple chains and franchising.

As regards the geographic distribution of the network examined, the extension in country of each of them is shown in table 1.

Table 1
Networks geographic extension index

NETWORKS	N. of regions covered by the network	Network geographic extension index (% of covered regions/total n. of regions in Italy)
Open Travel Network	4	20%
Pinguino Viaggi	11	55%
Giramondo	16	80%
Welcome Travel Group	18	90%
Frigerio Viaggi	7	35%
Le marmotte	12	60%
Domina Network	16	80%
Blu Vacanze	15	75%
Cisalpina	16	80%
Elitaria	16	80%
VentaPoint	16	80%
Uniglobe Italia	15	75%
Marsupio Group	8	40%
Travel Division	7	35%
Buona Vacanza	12	60%
CIT Viaggi	11	55%

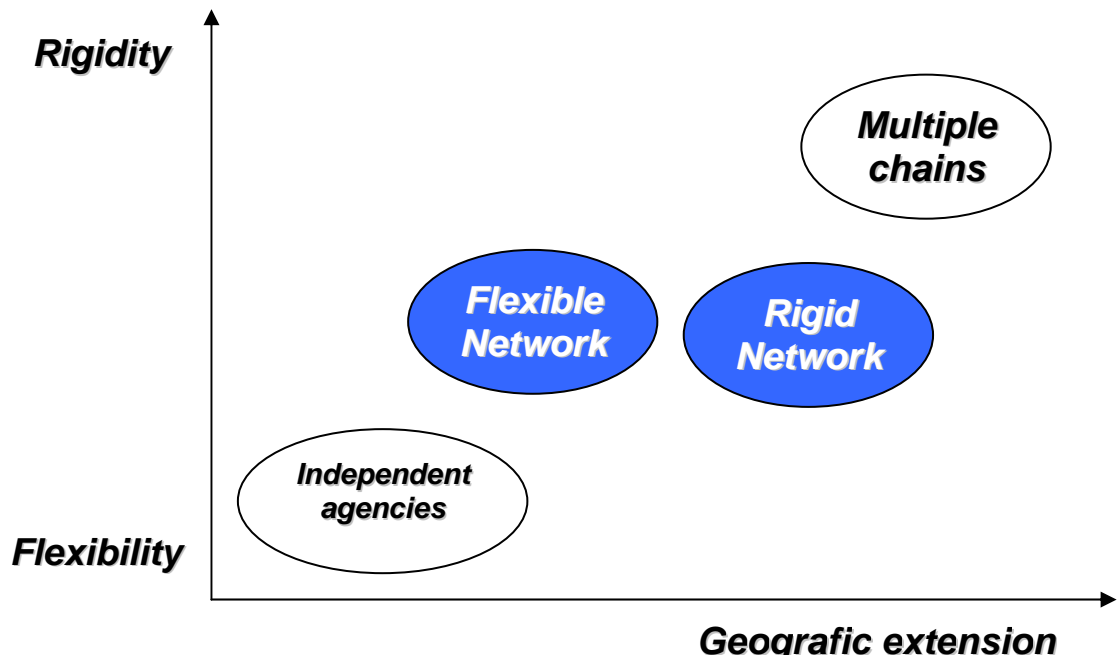
Considering the 20 Regions in Italy, the majority of networks is almost widespread all over the country, with a certain concentration in Central and Northern Italy: just four of them focus on a deeper penetration in one or two regions (these are the networks whose geographic extension index is less than 50%).

4. Strategic choices for TAs according to Resource-based Theory.

Taking into account all the variables showed in paragraph 3, as well as the grade of geographic extension, it is possible to prosecute the analysis trying to point out the level of flexibility/rigidity of the different configurations examined.

In figure 9 the different configurations are therefore positioned according to the two examined variables: the grade of rigidity/flexibility of the networks and their geographic extension in terms of regions covered.

Figure 9
Networks configurations according to
the grade of flexibility/rigidity and the geographic extension



As it can be noticed, some of the configurations are in the area of the “more flexible forms”, while others in the more rigid ones. The former are the more innovative networks, while the latter are the more traditional ones. By comparing the two groups some of the above underlined differences are outlined in table 2.

Table 2
Main characteristics of the two types of network

Traditional and more rigid networks	Innovative and more flexible networks: multichannel strategies
<p>The Travel Agent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pays an entrance fee; • pays a royalty on annual sales; • substitutes his company’s brand with that of the network; • has a substantial change in image (good or bad); • acquires more market power in transactions; • can get overcommissions according to sales; • can get accountability and cash management centralized services; • high standardization of furniture, centralized training programs; • can benefit of privileged relations with GDS that can’t be reached as a single TA; • more structured aggregations. 	<p>For the Travel Agent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No entrance fee or royalty; • Sign and brand of TA together with that of the network; • acquires more market power in transactions but less than national/international chains/nets; • can get overcommissions according to sales; • can get accountability and cash management centralized services; • can benefit of privileged relations with GDS that can’t be reached as a single TA; • consulting and training programs provided; • less structured aggregations.

It is clear that the traditional forms are more structured, based on the payment of entrance fees and royalties, with a relevant role played by the network brand and much more standardization since they are more homogeneous in image, brand, furniture, colours, etc. The more flexible ones usually provide for more specific agreements, linked to a particular tour operator or just to get higher transaction power with suppliers. They usually tend to keep the specific know-how of existing companies and their position on local markets. In fact, while the first group tends to acquire business start-ups and is more appropriate for these cases, the other is proper of already known and developed travel agents. Besides, while the former are more widespread on national territory and, as said, more standardized, the latter show a deeper penetration on local markets.

The analysis conducted on the cases' sample has allowed to examine important strategic and organizational aspects, in order to understand the main differences, in managing the network, according to the Resource-based Theory (Dierickx I., Cool K., 1989; Barney J., 1991; Mahoney J.T., Panadian J.R., 1992; Peteraf M.A., 1993; Jensen O., Wernefelt B., 1984; Aaker D.A., 1989; Grant R.M., 1991; Hall, 1992; Amit R., Schoemaker P.J.H., 1993; Collis D.J., Montgomery C.A., 1995; Penrose E., 1959).

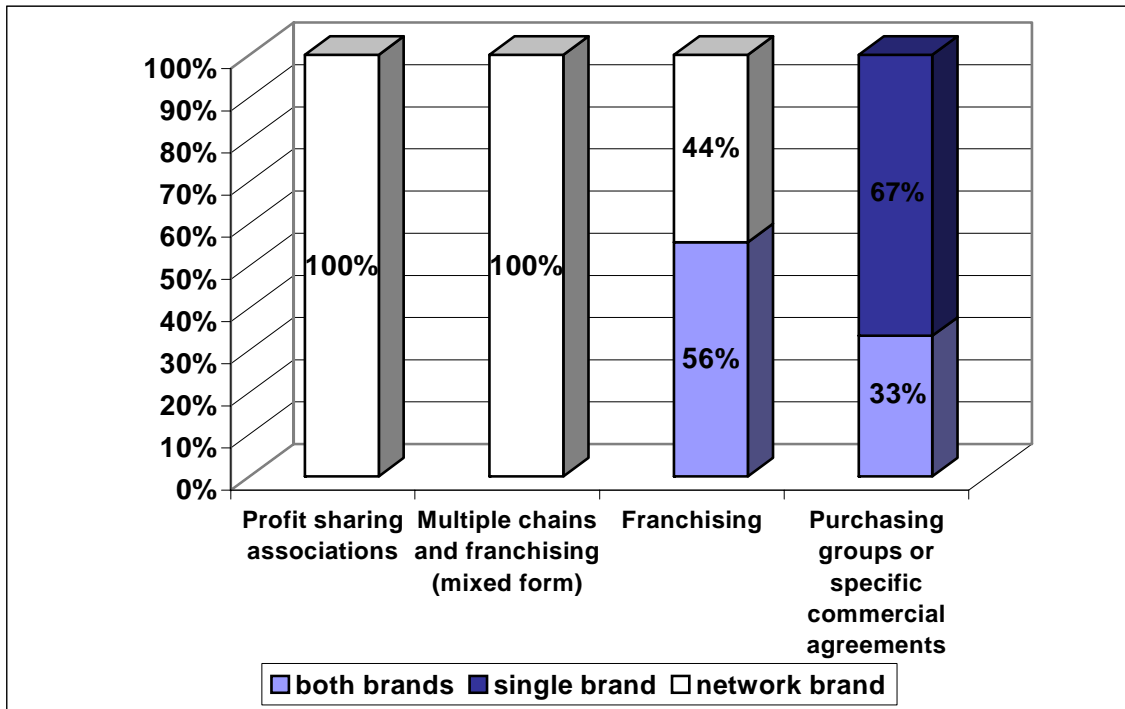
In particular, the aim is of analysing the roots of network competitiveness. In order to understand this, it is necessary, however, to take into account the specificity of the configurations found in the analysis.

The more structured forms, as underlined before, are based on a higher standardization of processes, services and images. On the other hand, the less structured ones tend to emphasize members' autonomy in the choice of furniture, shop signs, brands and service standards.

Connected to this aspect, there is the fact that while in the cases of franchising, mixed forms and profit sharing associations there is a greater interest towards business start-ups, in order to transfer the typical know-how of the group, in the other two configurations members are usually TA already known on the territory and their entrance in the network is conditioned by the possess of expertise, capabilities, skills and other intangible resources, potential sources of sustained competitive advantage for the all group.

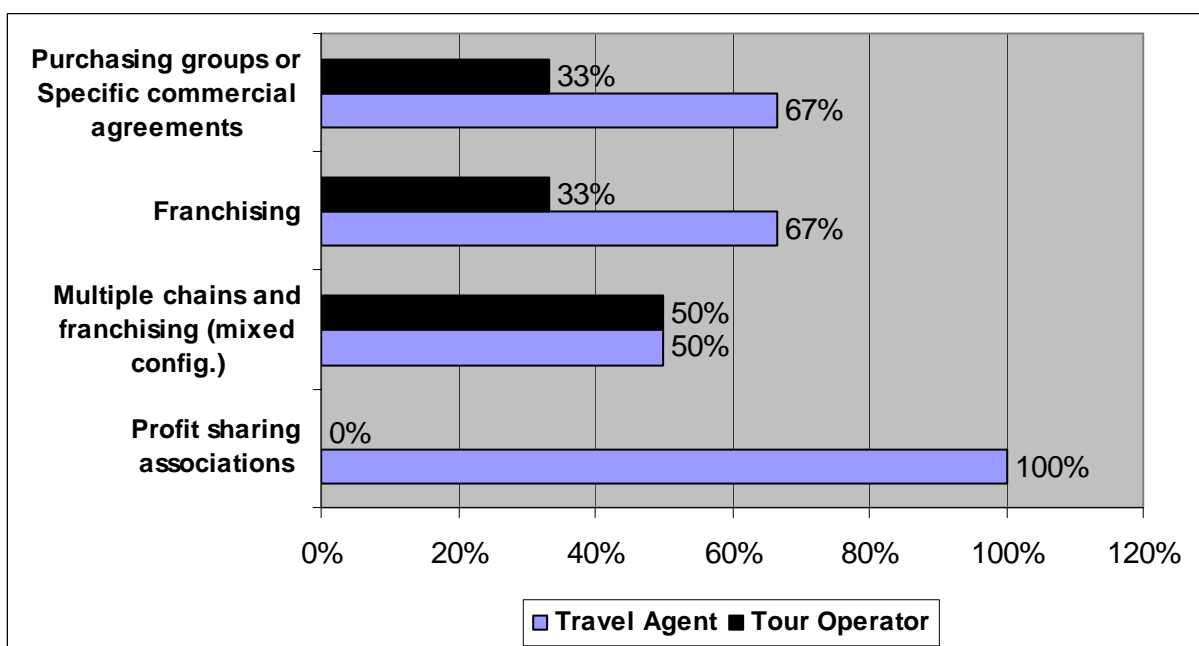
Therefore, in the purchasing groups and specific commercial agreements the single brand is the most widespread choice, that prevails over the network brand, while for members of the profit sharing associations and mixed forms it's just the opposite (prevailing of the network brand).

Figure 10
Brand adoptions by different networks configurations



In order to understand the roots of these differences, it is important to take into account also the process of network set up. As shown in figure 11, the majority of them are established by travel agents; others are promoted by tour operators.

Figure 11
Relationship between the type of promoter and the forms of collaboration



The aims, in the two cases, are of course different. Those that are promoted by TA are set up with the main intent of empowering the bargaining power to suppliers, assuring them a widespread diffusion of the sold products on the market and of developing commercial initiatives otherwise unaffordable for a single TA. On the other hand, networks provided by tour operators are linked with the objective of improving the TO's sales in area of locations of affiliated members.

According to our research, almost all the networks that present the characteristic of having a single privileged relationship with one supplier are directly related to a Tour Operator in search of more control of the demand. On this regard, even "Open Travel Network", created by independent travel agencies, proposes a commercial agreement that obliges the members to acquire a small amount of seats on determined airline routes or rooms in hotel chains of the tour operator "I Viaggi del Delfino", but, on the other hand, avoiding to pay entrance fee in the network or royalties on their sales revenues.

Table 3
Networks related to a single privileged supplier

NETWORK	TYPE OF PROMOTER	PRIVILEGED SUPPLIER
Open Travel Network	TA	I Viaggi del Delfino
Pinguino Viaggi	TO	Pinguino Viaggi TO
Domina Network	TO	Domina Travel
Elitaria	TO	Elitaria TO
VentaPoint	TO	Viaggi del Ventaglio

It has to be underlined that, apart from considering the promoter, the creation of a network of travel agencies derives from commercial agreements that go beyond the contractual logic, implying a more cooperative one, as in the strategic alliances.

The analysis of the creation and development process of a successful network points out the relationship existing among strategic goals, network configuration and members' characteristics, highlighting primarily the resources required in each single phase (Figure 12).

The different strategic goals identified during the planning phase by the promoter will affect the choice of the particular structure that the cooperation among firms will take and the characteristics required to be part of the network.

The performance of the network as a whole, both in terms of an efficient and effective management of the relationships among the members and in terms of the economic results, will be determined by the value of the resources possessed, at a central level and by each member, in the single phases of the process. The sustainability of the competitive advantage will be based on the degree of rarity and imitability of these resources.

Owing to the important changes in the industry mainly connected with ICT, in fact, Moreover, in the sell of tourist products two main goals have to be achieved and exactly: customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. The travel agent's work, in this sense, can be very important, owing to (Bigné et al, 2002):

- relationship marketing (confidence, trust, kindness and expertise of employees);
- attributes of the product (more precise information, video, etc.).

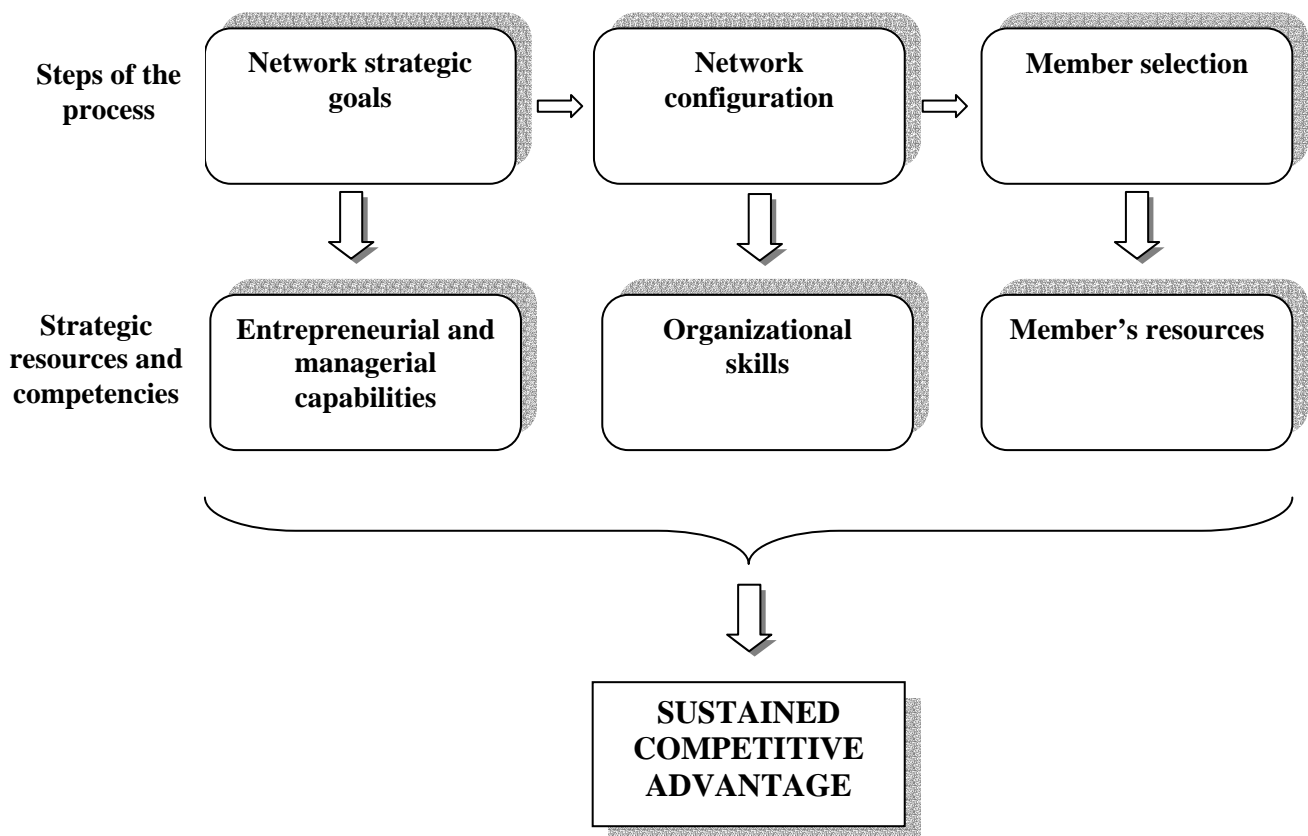
Different studies conducted in Europe, however, show how deep transformations are necessary in the traditional channel to compete in modern environment. Competitiveness, that has to follow the changes in demand, can be achieved also through continuous technical innovations: *the distribution process requires not only specific competences in tourism industry but also the capacity of using*

new tools in new ways. Successful companies, from this point of view, are those that see also digital and multimedial tools as opportunities rather than a threat.

A recent research in Spain on the main factors of satisfaction on the services of travel agents (Millan, Esteban, 2004) shows that the most important factors are:

- 1) *service* (employment confidence, service provision continuously well, follow-up of the client, accuracy of employees, time dedicated to each client);
- 2) *empathy* (interest in solving problems to the client, understanding the specific needs of the client, individual attention and information);
- 3) *reliability* (provide the service within agreed time, complying with agreed premises, fast and flexible service, clear and sincere information).

Figure 12
The creation process of a successful network



The key resources in the definition of the strategic goals are the entrepreneurial and managerial capabilities of the process promoters, since it is extremely important, from the beginning, to evaluate and choose the right variables in order to achieve the group growth objectives. The organizational skills should guide the selection of the network configuration consistent to the achievement of the strategic goals. During the members' selection phase it is critical to identify the prerogatives that the potential members should possess so that their resources are complementary to those of the other members and of the network as a whole.

The sources of the success and of the sustained competitive advantage of a network, according to the resource-based theory, are to be identified in these resources, necessary in all the phases of the network creation process and for its future development.

The more critical factors noticed in the analysis, regarding these typologies of interfirm collaborations, are:

1) the existence of win-win conditions, which implies advantages for all members that decide to affiliate, that show an adequate level of homogeneity (in terms of sizes of the firm, market power, etc.). This is quite easy to get in European contexts, where there are many small and medium enterprises and the range of strategic and marketing action of the network by far exceeds that of each single affiliated TA;

2) clear objectives in projects and initiatives brought about by the network;

3) among the main aspects, trust among partners, which also means absence of negative widespread diseconomies or asymmetric information: parts have to be trustworthy and the cooperation has to be trustful; from this point of view the partnership creation and development process implies the overcome of opportunistic behaviours and other aspects that are typically analyzed by Transaction-cost Economics (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1979 and ss.);

4) cultural and organizational compatibility, which does not necessarily mean homogeneity but capacity of communication among partners, flows of information and knowledge sharing, in order to get to a common language and improve it;

5) connected with the previous one, partners' attitudes towards sharing and/or integrating resources: this is a very important aspect, that somehow differentiates, or better reinforces the network's logic from the strategic alliances' one. Strategic alliances are in fact forms of cooperation among independent companies; in networks and partnerships, especially in tourism industry, there are deep links, complementarities and connections between the products/services provided as well as business activities. This pushes towards a *systemical* logic, both from a strategic and an operational/organizational point of view;

6) managerial fiat, which refers to the network management system and the specific competences of the board/corporation that leads the network. This factor refers to skills and competences of the network itself and in particular of the company or board that manages the whole system. At this level skills connected with coordination, strategic analysis and strategy formulations, insight in selecting affiliation demands and organizational matters are extremely critical;

7) efficient and effective techniques and methodologies, that is organizational instruments, methodologies and decision support systems, all important for converting potential resources into effective strategic factors.

Therefore, the most proactive networks show higher skills and competences in:

a) network entrepreneurship and leadership;

b) network coordination;

c) networking specific competences;

d) skills in targeting management, both at the network and at the single TA levels. As regards the networks, it refers to the skills in selling products and dealing with more and more sophisticated and demanding clients (personal consulting);

e) capabilities not only in front office activities, but also in back-office management, in order to get more efficiency also through information and communication technology (ICT);

f) specific competences in managing relationships with suppliers.

All the aspects above bring to important implications, since the two main configurations show a very different approach in acquiring and managing strategic resources, that is resources that can take to sustained competitive advantage. While the more structured ones are, as already underlined, more appropriate for business start-ups, creating and improving new and specific capabilities, in the second single travel agents' competences and skills are considered to be a strength for the whole network and even better emphasized.

The two models are not really alternative, but rather complementary, since they refer to different typologies of TA and at different phases of their lifecycle.

It is then important to get to some conclusions, also taking into account some further research developments:

- are more important capabilities as specialists or generalists in the distribution process?
- which can be further development paths for inter-firm networks among small and medium enterprises?
- is there a future for single TA?

In the worldwide web hypercompetition, TA are in front of a serious challenge: finding new strategic paths or liquidating. Networking and partnerships' processes are one of the paths that seem to prevail with good performance results in several cases. The mix and typologies of these resources and capabilities varies according to the type of configuration: in some cases certain kinds of resources prevail, while in others different skills and competences are required and developed. However, in order to gain sustained competitive advantage, or at least to be competitive, they do have to invest significantly on these resources and competences: differently, they are a destined to be a bubble!

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