

THE GLOBAL MARKET OF SMALL BUSINESSES BY E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS

Domenico CONSOLI*

Abstract

Nowadays we live in a global market era. For small businesses (SBs), that do not have financial and human resources, to sell in a big market by an e-commerce platform can be a competitive strategy. The electronic platform can reinforce the weaknesses of an absence of a commercial network to interact with end customers, especially if they live in another country.

The platform allows small businesses to operate on the long tail. In fact they can sell also few specific products /services to a large number of people in a global context. Obviously, in economic terms, Small Businesses cannot compete with the big ones that can have most advanced technology and software for information processing. However, for SBs the reduced availability of resources is not an impediment to sell in a global market. Owners of SBs can directly spend and devote part of their free time to support the online sale. Being lean and flexible enterprises they can execute more quickly orders, collected by the website, and therefore the distribution process is more fast. In the paper we describe a research on e-commerce in a small companies sample and in particular an analysis of websites and interviews, in dept, to entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *Small Business, e-commerce, ICT, social media, web 2.0, global market.*

1. Introduction

In recent years the use of Internet has grown, especially with the explosion of mobile devices. More companies have understood the importance of this contact channel with customers to be more competitive.

Small and medium businesses by Internet can develop an e-commerce section inside the company website. The online sale can be execute in parallel with the sale of physical store and then traditional and modern modalities can be integrated. By e-commerce it is possible to enlarge the target market.

There are companies that decide to sell their products only through e-commerce platforms and others that integrate e-commerce with a traditional physical channel.

It must also distinguish between e-store generalist who sell any kind of product and niche store focused on particular products that customers can scarcely find in traditional shops.

For big brands, the electronic commerce is focused on the loyalty of existing customers, while for small companies it means to know and achieve new customers and sell in large areas.

Many surveys have shown that, even in times of crisis, there is always a growth of online sales. Until a few years ago, the creation and costs of an e-commerce website was supported only by large companies, but nowadays, thanks to the evolution of technology and open platforms, costs have drastically reduced.

The main drivers of e-commerce for the customer are: saving time, economic benefits and the variety of assortment. The e-commerce offers a wide

range of products and consumers have more information and details on products.

It is easy to find online products at lower prices and it is possible to compare more products. Users before buying can read opinions and reviews: recommendations and experiences of other people are always important for the choice.

For small and medium enterprises it is convenient to operate online to expand the sales area in a global market.

Sometimes there are online sellers incorrect and not serious. People have fear to provide credit card and information online. Customers may be skeptical in buying at little-known e-commerce website that does not transmit safety. Therefore a good number of online customers are available to buy only in the most popular platform, which have invested heavily to protect customer privacy and to make secure their purchases.

The quality of the web page and the safety offered to customers allow contribution margins and higher prices for big players thus putting "out game" many small sellers.

Surely the e-commerce is a tool of a multi-channel system to support the enterprise-customer relationship.

There are various options to buy that guarantee the interaction between the traditional channel (store) with new online channels by smartphones and social networks.

It is important the use of social media in the e-commerce platform to listen customer opinions.

The structure of this paper is the following: in the next session we show a literature review. In the third section a SWOT analysis of e-commerce is described. In the fourth section we analyse some

* Adjunct Professor, PhD, School of Economics, Management and Statistics, University of Bologna (e-mail: domenico.consoli@unibo.it).

results of e-commerce researchs. The successive section illustrates some cheap platforms that Small Business could use to sell their products/services in Internet. Then we describe, in detail, our research on a sample of small companies. At the end some conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature review

Over the years the web has evolved. Ellion (2007) identifies three different web phases: information/communication (data publication), commercial activities (focus on e-commerce) and networking phase (social interactions). The web has become a platform where we can implement different value-added services (O'Reilly, 2005; 2007).

In the current economic situation, Internet is increasingly transforming the evolution of social and business dynamics. It revolutiones the approach by which companies offer in the market and the new sales method. Customers intend carry out activities such as the development of networks of people with the same interests who post reviews, share experiences and purchase online products/services.

The website becomes particularly innovative with e-commerce platform (Golden, 1996; Sieber, 1996; Golden et. al, 2004). Thanks to this new modality of sale it is possible to sell in a global market also for B2B companies (Elia et al., 2007; Quaddus and Hofmeyer, 2007).

Recently customer can buy online products/services in mobility by smastphone/tablet (m-commerce) (Tiwari et al., 2011).

If companies have a clear strategic project of e-commerce (Fisher et. al, 2007) in the long term can increase sales and profits (Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

The e-commerce can have different impacts on customers (Moe and Fader, 2004; Van Baal and Dach, 2005). The customer can visit many time the website to acquire additional information and then conclude the online transaction or buy in a physical store. Several studies have been conducted on the factors that stimulate consumers to use online business applications (e-banking, e-commerce). Chen et al. (2002) examined consumer attitudes towards shopping in virtual stores and Tan and Teo (2000) user characteristics for the adoption of Internet Banking. Both are agree that young people are favored to execute online transactions.

By the e-commerce we can eliminate intermediaries with a reduction in transaction costs (Butera, 2001). In real time we can have the availability of goods and satisfy requirements of customers (Chaffey et al., 2000).

The implications of an e-commerce project is not only technological. It requires, inside the organization a cultural transformation and a

reorganization of management processes, working procedures and also the update of the Information System.

In the case of e-commerce, the resistance to change is more significant by the cultural gap between the generations: young people are more familiar with web technologies and use them every day (Parolini, 2003).

By e-commerce, the company can get benefits such as the reduction of costs, the increase of the potential market and opportunities for the new business (Beck, Wigand, and Konig, 2005; Fink and Disterer, 2006; Grandon & Pearson, 2004).

Mertens et al (2001) argue that drivers for e-commerce investments are the perceived benefits (Daniel and Wilson, 2002) and the organization's readiness to satisfy external requests. Currently e-commerce is more pervasive in large and small companies (Burke, 2005; Sharma, Ahmed, & Wickramasinghe, 2004). Small businesses are not willing to make high investments and change their business model (Keindl 2000) because they do not fully understand the potentiality of e-commerce for their resistance to change, the adaptation to specific contractual rules, the uncertainty about payments and the fear about the safety of online banking transactions.

We believe that e-commerce can be an opportunity for small businesses devoid of sale networks (Ching and Ellis, 2004; Al-Qirim, 2005; Cioppi and Savelli, 2006; Van den Berg, 2008). In fact the "global paradox" of John Naisbitt can occur: more the global economy becomes big and more strong are small operators.

The website, and in particular e-commerce, allows small businesses to operate on a large area and on the long tail (Anderson, 2006). SBs can sell few specific products /services to a large number of people on a global market.

Small businesses, more lean and flexibles, can manage, in a quickly modality, orders collected by the website, the production process and the distribution to end users.

In an e-commerce platform it is important also the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc...) (Mathew et al., 2016) to collect customer opinions for improving the product/service and also for advertising (Lu et al., 2016) and promoting products/services (Ching and Ellis, 2004; Zhao, 2016).

3. SWAT Analysis of e-commerce

3.1 Strenghts

1. *Short distances.* With an e-commerce platform and especially with the advent of m-commerce (mobile commerce), it will be possible to sell in the World.

2. *New customers by search engines.* A virtual store will be discovered by search engines.

3. *Lower costs.* Discounted prices for customers. In particular the reduction of costs covers the following sectors:

- Advertising & Marketing: the virtual store can be achieved thanks to the traffic generated by search engines and social media;

- Labor costs: the automatic cash processes, billing, payment reduce the number of employees required to manage an e-commerce store;

- Real Estate: An e-commerce seller does not require a large investment in real estate.

4. *Fast Identification of the product.* Through an intuitive navigation by search box it is easy to individuate the product. Some websites remind to customers the list of preferences and facilitate the repetitive purchase.

5. *Save cost and time for mobility.* A platform of e-commerce allows customers to visit virtually the shop, with a few click of the mouse without transfer by car and without long and boring queues in the city.

6. *Compare shops.* There are several websites that allow customers to browse many online sellers and find the best price.

7. *Wide range of offers and coupons.* In the virtual store will be possible to find coupons and best prices.

8. *Additional information.* Additional information about the entire line of products respect to physical store.

9. *Personalized communication.* Send to customer personalized email taking into consideration previous purchase or previous interests.

10. *Always open shop.* The virtual store is always open, 365 days for year.

11. *Offer of niche products.* In the virtual world it is easy to sell niche products. It depends on the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategy to fast find products on search engines.

3.2 Weakness

1. *Untouchable product.* The lack of touch of products and of human contact with the sale staff, from many potential customers can be an obstacle for purchasing.

2. *Delay in the delivery of products.* If a customer needs a gift for the same day, or need urgently a product, the online purchase may not be possible except, for example, an e-book or a specific software.

3. *Not all products may be sold.* This is true for perishable products or for those particularly delicate.

4. *Do not try a product.* Many customers have the need to touch the product, to try a pair of shoes or test a perfume before buying.

3.3 Opportunities

1. *The growth of online market.* For the new generation is more comfortable buying online. The e-commerce will be a great opportunity for all those who wish to develop a new business.

2. *Global Opening of the business.* Owners of a physical store through an e-commerce platform can sell in a wide area more interesting of a local market.

3. *Strong business to business connections.* Companies have more chances to cooperate and collaborate such as to expand the supply chain.

3.4 Threats

1. *Identity theft.* The safety is a very sensitive issue especially for the external threat from possible fraud on credit card and for the identity theft and the protection of personal data in the login phase.

2. *Competition.* The entry barriers for developing an e-commerce platform are very low and therefore there are a lot of competition and a reduction of product prices with lower contribution margin for online companies. Furthermore will be possible to find online players unserious and inappropriate.

4. Some researchs on e-commerce

4.1 TNS research

In this sub-section, a quantitative survey of TNS (tns-global.it) on a sample of 202 Italian SMEs that do not make online business is described. This survey was done by telephone with the C.A.T.I. (Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing) technique. The sectors in which companies operate are the following: Food, Health and beauty, House, Furniture, Garden and DIY (do-it-yourself), Car, Motorcycles, Accessories, Fashion, Clothing, Electronics.

The geographical origin of the companies are: NorthWest, North East, Center and South Italy.

Regarding the digital equipment of the companies: the 95% has an Internet connection, the 80% of employees has a computer or mobile device and the 52% has a website but does not use it for the sale.

The results of the perception of e-commerce among SMEs analysed have been as follow:

- 92% said that they never have considered to use e-commerce platforms

- 88% of respondents believe the e-commerce is not useful

- 26% has fear that the electronic commerce can be risky for the traditional commerce

- 69% is convinced that the e-commerce does not increase sales volumes

- 72% thinks that e-commerce is a complex channel

- 56% believes that an e-shop section requires

high investments

- 43% believes that e-commerce is only suitable for large companies

- 21% believes that their products are not suitable for online sales. The peak of this perception is reached between companies of the food sector (44%).

Therefore there is still some resistance from the Italian SMEs to the e-commerce strategy. While in Italy the e-commerce phenomenon is growing and there are more people who buy online, on the other hand, there is a huge number of companies, small and medium, who does not believe that online trading can be a growth factor. In Italy the e-commerce has a penetration of 4% while in other countries like France, Germany and the UK the percentages increase from 12% to 16%. It is need a cultural change in digital business. The change is a major factor in the growth of a company, especially for small-medium businesses. The change involves a renewal of the way of doing business.

4.2 Milan Polytechnic Observatory

In Italy for the Milan Polytechnic Observatory (osservatori.net) the e-commerce penetration in main European markets (UK, Germany, France and Spain), US and Asian markets (South Korea and Japan) is higher than the Italian market (4% in 2015).

In particular, in a first group of countries where the e-commerce is more mature like Korea, Japan, UK and US, the rate is between 13 and 17%, about 4 times the Italian, and the annual growth rate in 2014 was between 10 and 15%. Instead, in the same year, in emerging markets - Brazil, India and Russia - the e-commerce penetration ranging from 0.5% to 2%.

The composition of the sample of online shopping is an indicator of the maturity of the sector. The analysis shows that in almost all the major international markets, the e-commerce purchases of products exceeds the services, while in Italy and Spain, the services still have a high incidence.

4.3 Assinform report

In 2014, for Assinform (assinform.it), the value of the e-commerce market in Italy (sales of products and services from Italian websites) reached 13.2 billion euro, an increase of 17% on 2013, and a percentage of retail sales, over the past, from 2.6 to 3.5%.

In 2014 there was an increase from 40% to 45% of the weight of online purchases of products. It should therefore reduce the gap with other European countries and the United States, where the product segments have a greater weight. Products with the most increase were consumer electronics, publishing and clothing. Italians online shoppers, on average in 2014, have made more than one purchase per month with a frequency that has generated more than 200 million transactions for the full year.

5. E-commerce platforms for SBs

The traffic of an online store depends on its position on search engines. The websites of sellers must be continually updated on the basis of algorithms that perform the rankings of search engines. The seller must uses different tools:

- Search Engine Marketing (SEM) to generate quality traffic to a particular website;
- Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to optimize the top results of searches;
- Social Media marketing (SMM) to increase, in website, the traffic through social networks
- E-mail marketing and newsletters to allow an exclusive and customized relationship with consumers and so the customer loyalty increases.

5.1 Blomming

Blomming (blomming.com) is a platform that allows anyone, individuals or companies, to sell through its own website, blog, Facebook page and directly on the same platform. The promotion is "Three Shop in one" through a centralized platform easy to use. Now it supports more than 22,000 online shops of which 60% Italian with 50,000 registered users and a catalog of over 260,000 products for the sale.

There is also a mobile application (<http://j.mp/blommingmobile>) that allows buy products on Blomming. The next version will allow not only to buy but also to sell in online modality with the system "Shop Three in one". Blomming is therefore a useful tool to enhance online presence, so that everyone can expand the business on Internet. The Blomming proposal contributes to the personal development of the entrepreneurship.

Blomming has recently introduced a new model of Social Affiliation, Social Share, which allows any Internet user, with an online presence on social media to earn not only selling products of others but also simply recommending, with posts or tweets, friends, parents and colleagues.

All people give opinions to buy products and tips to friends and family. In this way it is possible to influence acquaintances via blogs or social networks like Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest.

5.2 Netberg

The Netberg platform (netberg.com) has already connected in Internet fifteen thousand small and medium enterprises. These companies can exploit the potential of selling on Internet.

The platform is simple to use like a Facebook page: in five minutes and few clicks, the company is online in the global market with a predefined layout. It is enough indicate the geolocation information, choose photos to put on, contents of the enterprise communication and then upload the products to sell. Any change is made directly by the entrepreneur.

Netberg works with two partners PayPal and UBS. When an order comes in, the company prints the label with the customer's address and prepares the package. When the payment, by the end customer, is made, Netberg holds 7% and turns the rest to the enterprise. Netberg earns also fees (about € 60) on the additional services such as the translation of the website in multiple languages or a complete version of the online showcase.

Netberg seeks to involve professional associations like Concommercio which has about 700 thousand companies that might be interested.

For this reason Netberg has launched a campaign on Facebook *#salviamolapmi* involving a testimonial as Oscar Farinetti, owner of Eataly. The idea of Netberg has aroused the interest of the European Parliament. The company has reached the final in Innopitch, an international competition within Unconventional EU Forum.

Now entrepreneur of Netberg are doing a Crowdfunding campaign to receive a funding to invest in sales and marketing development.

5.3 Poste e-commerce

Poste e-commerce (poste.it/imprespa/e-commerce/) is the new solution for e-commerce offer by the Italian Post. A solution "turnkey" complete and efficient, which really includes all necessary tools to make successful an e-commerce platform: development and customization of the website, the catalog configuration, integration with shipping and logistics, safe payment systems. The target is Small Businesses that have understood the importance of this channel and want to pursue the road of e-commerce with an appropriate tool and a good partner.

Poste e-commerce is a solution aligned to the highest standards of the sector. It use an open source platform, leaders of the world market, that meets all the requirements of flexibility and simplicity required by customers. Customers can easily update the library, implement marketing campaigns by setting discounts and loyalty programs, verify sales performance thanks to the statistical report, update the virtual store with tools provided by the platform.

Shipments are made with the service "Paccocelere Impresa", which allows the delivery in 1-2 working days (in Italy), online tracking and the management of returns. As payment tools, the Virtual Pos of Poste Italian, linked to the account InProprioPOS, allows entrepreneurs to receive payments with all Poste Italian channels (PostePay, BancoPosta, crediting account BancoPosta) but also with cards Visa, Visa Electron and Mastercard.

The Italian Post Office offer is designed to meet the needs of companies at different levels of maturity: companies that want to start online sales and companies that have already an e-commerce platform but they want expand sales and the positioning on search engines.

Small Businesses also have the ability to manage by themselves their own online store and the e-commerce processes (shipping, payments, returns, logistics, customer relations, web marketing and promotion) or to entrust these activities to the Italian Post Office.

In particular there are different packages:

- *Leader Offer*: the solution for companies who want to maintain their positioning online and require an offer comprehensive and personalized of e-commerce platform to support the management of their own online store.

- *Full Outsourcing Offer*: for companies that want to sell online by their e-commerce website, but not manage the sale processes. The company entrust to *Poste e-Commerce* the management of the online store, payment processes, shipping, logistics and customer communications. The company is limited to provide the products and Poste sells on its behalf.

- *Custom Offer*: for companies that have business structured processes and require to Poste to create timely solutions for the platform.

6. Some researchs on e-commerce

6.1 Research methodology

From the methodological point of view, this paper uses a qualitative case study research to understand how Small Businesses use e-commerce platforms. The aim of this analysis is to explore the object of study in depth. We opted for a multiple case study, in order to analyse firms with different characteristics in terms of industry, size, technologies used, entrepreneur's profile and so on. Thanks to a local entrepreneurial association, a sample of 48 SBs has been selected.

Companies of the sample operate in various industries: mechanical-electronic (19%), furniture (25%), fashion-art (23%), food and wellness (17%) and services-communication (16%). They belong to different size classes: less than 3 employees (35%); 3 to 10 employees (23%); 11 to 30 employees (25%) and 31 to 50 employees (17%).

Empirical analysis followed two main steps. First of all SBs' website was analysed in order to know if they used e-commerce platforms. The second and main step was depth interviews and informal conversations with owners/managers. Data was collected in the period 2012-2013.

6.2 Websites Analysis

Websites of a sample of 48 companies have been analysed and we considered SBs that, inside their corporate website, have an e-shop section also in an experimental phase. Of these 48 companies only 15 meet this goal and therefore only the 31% of the sample.

Among these companies there are those who are starting now with small experiments, others with

a brief experience in online sale and few others who are experts in the sector.

In this section, we refer to analysed websites of case studies. For privacy reasons, we assign to each company a fantasy name that ends with a number, which indicates the number of employees. If the company identifier does not end with a number it means that only the owner work inside the company without any employee.

1. *Lpam20* (Furniture). In the website there is an e-shop section. This section is made in a simple modality from an internal trade manager who assembled different components.

2. *Saab8* (Food). The company hasn't the license to sell to end customers but to retailers and wholesalers. For this reason it use the Italian Food online platform. The company sells to Italian Food (IF) and after IF handles a commission and executes the delivery to the end customer. This platform includes other products: wines, pasta and so on.

3. *Cmme16* (Mechanical/Electronic). Regarding e-commerce the company is beginning an experience sales of certain products, hulls and replacement parts for molding of plastic material. In this way they avoid the cost of the commercial network.

4. *Fbma2* (Fashion/Art). At the moment the company work for other enterprises (Business-to-Business) but in the future the owners think to develop direct market with the end customer by an e-commerce platform.

5. *Mhsc7* (Services/Communication). The firm sells and rents online touristic services (villa, rural houses,...) and collaborates with several travel agencies in Italy and abroad. It think to make even a type of online trading of art craft products, complements and objects. The strength is the computer science experts who work inside the organization.

6. *Dvab1* (Food/Wellness). It is a wine producer that is starting to sell online wine bottles using e-commerce platforms of other companies.

7. *Ptma* (Fashion/Art). The owner when used only the e-commerce platform frequently upgraded the website and the product catalog. Now that he has a commercial agent he makes the update few times for month. Now he directly manages the community on Facebook by answering to customers every night, after the work.

8. *Vaam1* (Fashion/Art). The company receives most orders through the online platform. Inside the organization there is a young worker who updates the website with text and pictures made by himself.

9. *Alcs5* (Services/Communication). The company makes e-commerce with machines for food. It advertises its own products on price comparators like Find Prices, Kelkoo, Hello, TopNegozi, Shoxshopping, Fandado.com, Last

shopping, shopping Boing, Affarando, NexTag. These websites are specialized in this area and make visible a firm to the general public. Certainly, in this way, the company attracts a number of visits per day higher than the enterprise website. Even most customers derive from these comparators.

10. *Brma8* (Fashion/Art). The company has a webmaster who develops and updates the website and interactive channels. The webmaster also interacts with SEO and Google adwords campaigns. The part of e-commerce is integrated with the physical stores. The enterprise is not specialized like Alcs5 company that makes e-commerce as a core business. For the owner the e-commerce is an addition. In fact Brma8 is not present on websites of price comparator.

11. *Elme17* (Mechanical/Electronic)

For its own products the company has an e-commerce web space. For other products it prefers have a sales network. At the moment, the platform is in an experimental phase.

12. *Masc* (Services/Communication). Initially the company had an e-commerce project of make-up and cosmetics on Blomming platform and after it acquired a virtual space on eBay. Now the company has an independent business website. The enterprise sends the customer's order to the supplier and after when it receives the products it sends them to the customer with the invoice. For the deliveries and withdrawals from suppliers *Masc* uses SDA and Bartolini couriers.

13. *Smma* (Fashion/Art). The owner is the only worker inside the organization. She makes many products, statues, jewels, necklaces of different types. The website, initially, was developed by a friend. She has also an e-shop section, although, at present, she hasn't made a lot of sales. People who access to e-shop section must register and to these contacts the owner sends the newsletter.

14. *Phma3* (Fashion/Art). In the core business of the company the user has the possibility to design the cover with his own pictures and share with friends on Facebook starting a process of word of mouth (WoM). The customer actively participates in the production process of Phma3. The customer buys its own customized cover on the e-shop section. He/she becomes prosumers, producers and consumers. This will also implement a mass customization process, since the covers have personalized drawings and images.

15. *Ccma20* (Fashion/Art). This company works in the fashion industry, a sector that stimulates the communication by social media. These tools help much the online sale on the e-shop platform.

6.3 Analysis of interviews and discussion on results

Results of interviews are discussed to better understand how SBs use and manage e-shop sections and the benefits obtained from the use of these tools.

The analysis of the interviews was very interesting and allowed us to understand certain dynamics and behaviours of SBs.

Most SBs prefer to invest gradually in websites and e-commerce in order to incrementally update technologies and devices. Firms try to found financial resources from domestic or foreign funds (Lpam20). Entrepreneurs of SBs work almost all day. The owner of *Ptma* said "From the downstairs laboratory, in the evening after work, I go upstairs at home and after eating I connect to the Facebook to respond to my customers that buy my products".

Small businesses, which are usually well rooted in the territory, could exploit the web to expand in a global market. Integrating in the website an e-commerce section may be able to expand the geographical boundaries of the market and sell products/services abroad. By social channels the customer can be reached anywhere.

In fact through a good e-commerce website enterprises may facilitate the implementation of an internationalization process and sell around the world. Small Business like *Dvba1*, *Ccma20* and *Brma8* can commercialize wines /clothes in a global context.

The micro *Alsc5* makes business only with e-commerce activities. Now it has specialized and invests heavily on search engines and price comparators. By these websites also receives opinions of customers who have purchased products. Some competitors that sell similar machines in physical stores have tried e-commerce experiments but they have had to close because they do not really believe in this concept.

Some company (*Masc*) begins selling online through eBay or Blomming and now it has integrated the e-shop section inside the website. Other companies have understood the power of e-commerce and not being licensed to sell to the end customer but only to retailers and wholesalers, in order to overcome this obstacle, they have used external sale platforms (*Saab8* and *Dvba1*). The supplier that manages the platform executes the delivery and the transport and the company will recognize a percentage on sales. If the company had made e-commerce independently it would have higher shipping costs with an impact on the product price.

Other small companies make e-commerce experiments in small steps (*Cmme16* cases) and only sell online specific components of their production. Instead a company, rooted in the territory, which does not want to expand on a global market prefers operate in a local context.

Some companies understand the benefits that can be obtained using the e-shop section instead of

the commercial sale networks (*Smma*, *Fbma2*) and so they can directly contact end customers, especially if they are placed in another part of the world. Through e-commerce sections embedded in their interactive websites they start to sell online in a global market. Surely in terms of financial resources small businesses can not compete with the larger ones, which can afford a Community Manager (*Brma8*, *Ccma20*) for the management of these virtual channels or they have advanced platforms or specific software for information processing.

However this reduced availability of resources, does not constitute an impediment for small businesses. Owners of these companies spend part of their free time to coordinate, in a best way, interactive virtual spaces.

It was possible for both individuals and companies to sell products/services to consumers directly through the website. In this way the distribution chain becomes short and so companies can increase their profit margins thanks to a considerable reduction in operating costs.

Web designers, in virtual store, becomes a strategic resource to cure in every detail the design of the website and the e-shop section.

7. Conclusions

Nowadays every small business (SBs), thanks to web technologies and virtual channels can operate and sell in a global market.

To facilitate the online sale in the e-commerce section, in addition to develop an attractive website, it is important to focus on products, quality photos and especially on customer service also in the post-sales phase.

Customers can buy online products/services in mobility by smastphone/tablet (m-commerce). In an e-commerce platform it is important also the use of social media to collect customer opinions for improving the product/service, for the advertising and promotion and for the follow-up during the post-sale period.

Nowadays, in the era of the knowledge and of social media, we must not forget that the customer is the King, a prosumer (producer and consumer), and an active and responsible consumer. Company must meet its own needs to increase the customer satisfaction. Customer opinions in Internet are very important for an enterprise, both for the improvement of products and for the reinforcement of the customer loyalty. Customers' feedback can determine the success or the failure of a company.

References:

- Al-Qirim, N. An Empirical Investigation of an E-Commerce Adoption-Capability Model in Small Businesses in New Zealand. *Electronic Markets*, 2005, 15(4), 418 – 437;
- Anderson C. *The Long Tail. Why the future of business is selling less of more*, Hyperion, New York, 2006;
- Bagozzi, R. P., & Dholakia, U. M. Intentional social action in virtual communities. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2002, 16(2), pp. 2– 21;
- Balasubramanian, S., & Mahajan, V. The economic leverage of the virtual community. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 2001, 5(3), 103–138;
- Beck, R., Wigand, R. T., & Konig, W. The Diffusion and Efficient Use of Electronic Commerce among Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: An International Three-Industry Survey. *Electronic Markets*, 2005, 15(1), pp. 38 – 52;
- Burke, K. The Impact of Firm Size on Internet Use in Small Businesses. *Electronic Markets*, 2005, 15(2), pp. 79 -93;
- Butera F. *Il campanile e la rete*, Il Sole 24 Ore, Milano, 2001;
- Chaffey, D., Mayer, M., Johnston, K. and Chadwick, F.E. *Internet Marketing: strategy, implementation and practice*. London: Prentice-Hall, 2000;
- Chen M., Lapaugh A.S. and Singh J.P. Predicting Category Accesses For A User In A Structured Information Space. *Proceedings of the 25th Annual International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and development in information retrieval (SIGIR'02)*, 2002, pp. 65–72;
- Ching, H. and Ellis, P. Marketing in cyberspace: What factors drive e-commerce adoption?, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 2004, Vol. 20, No. 3-4, pp.409-430;
- Cioppi M., Savelli E. *ICTe PM. L'impatto delle nuove tecnologie sulla gestione aziendale delle piccole imprese*, ASPI/INS-EDIT, Genova, 2006;
- Daniel, E., and Wilson, H. Adoption intention and benefits realised: A study of e-commerce in UK SMEs, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 2002, 9(4), 331-348;
- Elia E., Lefebvre L. A., and Lefebvre É. Focus of B-to-B e-commerce initiatives and related benefits in manufacturing small- and medium-sized enterprises. *Information Systems and eBusiness Management (ISeB)*, 2007, 5(1), pp. 1 – 23;
- Ellion. *Web 2.0 and the travel industry: practical strategies for exploiting the social media revolution*. White paper. Retrieved April 17, 2007, from: <http://www.ellion.co.uk/sectors/travel/index.php>
- Fink, D., & Disterer, G. International case studies: To what extent is ICT infused into the operations of SMEs? *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 2006, 19(6), pp. 608-624;
- Fisher, J., Craig, A., & Bentley, J. Moving from a Web Presence to e-Commerce: The Importance of a Business - Web Strategy for Small-Business Owners. *Electronic Markets*, 2007, 17(4), pp. 253-262;
- Golden, W. *Electronic Commerce at Work: Kennys Bookshop & Art Galleries, Galway, Ireland in the Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on EDI-IOS (eds.) Swatman, P.M.C. et al., Slovenia, 1996)*, 291-303;
- Golden, W., Hughes, M. and Ruane, L. "Successful SMEs in e-commerce", in Al-Qirim, N. A. Y. (Ed.), *Electronic Commerce in Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises: Frameworks, Issues and Implications*, Idea Group, Hershey, PA, 1996, pp. 165-78;
- Golden, W., Hughes, M. and Ruane, L. "Successful SMEs in e-commerce", in Al-Qirim, N. A. Y. (Ed.), *Electronic Commerce in Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises: Frameworks, Issues and Implications*, Idea Group, Hershey, PA, 1996, pp. 165-78;
- Grandon E. E. and Pearson, J. M. Electronic commerce adoption: an empirical study of small and medium US businesses. *Information & Management*, 2004, 42(1), pp. 197-216;
- Keindl B. Competitive Dynamics and New Business Models for SMEs in the Virtual Marketplace, *Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship*, 2000, 5, 1, pp. 73-85;
- Lu Xianghua, Xia Zhao, and Ling Xue. Is Combining Contextual and Behavioral Targeting Strategies Effective in Online Advertising?. *ACM Trans. Manage. Inf. Syst.* 7, 1, Article 1 (February 2016), 20 pages;
- Mathew Binny, Unnikrishnan E. A, Tanmoy Chakraborty, Niloy Ganguly, and Samik Datta. Mining Twitter Conversations around E-commerce Promotional Events. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing Companion (CSCW '16 Companion)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2016, 345-348.;
- Mehrtens, J., Cragg, P. & Mills A. A Model of Internet Adoption by SMEs. *Information and Management*, 2001, Vol. 39, pp. 165-176;
- Moe, Wendy W. Buying, Searching, or Browsing: Differentiating Between Online Shoppers Using In-Store Navigational Clickstream, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2003, 13 (1–2), 29–39;
- Moe, Wendy W. and Peter S. Fader Capturing Evolving Visit Behavior in Clickstream data, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2004), 18 (1), 5-19;
- O'Reilly T. What is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software, <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>, accessed November 17, 2005;

- O'Reilly T. What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software, *International Journal of Digital Economics*, 2007, Vol. 65, pp.17-37;
- Parolini C. (2003). E-business nelle imprese tradizionali. Egea, Milano, 2003;
- Quaddus, M., & Hofmeyer, G. An investigation into the factors influencing the adoption of B2B trading exchanges in small businesses. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 2007, 16(3), pp. 202 -215;
- Sharma, S. K., Ahmed, N., & Wickramasinghe, N. E-commerce adoption in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Asia: a study of the early stages of e-commerce uptake. *International Journal of Internet & Enterprise Management*, 2004, 2(3), pp. 221-240;
- Sieber, P. Virtuality as Strategic Approach for Small and Medium Sized IT Companies to Stay Competitive in a Global Market, in the Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Systems, Ohio, Cleveland, 1996;
- Tan M. & Teo T. Factors influencing the adoption of Internet banking. *Journal of the Association for Information Sciences*, 2000, 1 , pp. 1-42;
- Tiwari Raj Gaurang, Mohd. Husain, Vishal Srivastava, and Kuldeep Singh. A hypercube novelty model for comparing E-commerce and M-commerce. In Proceedings of the 2011 International Conference on Communication, Computing & Security (ICCCS '11). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2011, 616-619;
- Van Baal, Sebastian and Christain Dach. Free Riding and Customer Retention Across Retailers' Channels, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 2005, 19 (2), 75-85;
- Van den Berg K.P. E-commerce in SMEs, EIM Paper M200804, 2008;
- Zhao Qi. E-commerce Product Recommendation by Personalized Promotion and Total Surplus Maximization. In roceedings of the Ninth ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining (WSDM '16). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2016, 709-709.