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Motivations to Participate in International Trade Fairs: The Portuguese Experience

ABSTRACT

Aims: This study explores the prime motives and barriers that drive or inhibit the Portuguese exporting SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) to exhibit at an international trade fair.
Study design: Survey, based on a questionnaire sent by email.
Place and Duration of Study: 68 Portuguese exporting SMEs, between January and July 2012.
Methodology: The present study was conducted in Portugal and sought to examine the firm's behavior regarding international trade fairs. In the preliminary stage of the research process an informal exploratory study was undertaken. Then, a survey based on a questionnaire sent by email collected the primary data used on the study.
Results: The results indicate that a strong motive to exhibit at a trade fair is to reinforce the market presence of the firm, the possibility of finding new ideas and test new products, establish relationships with present and future customers, and enhance the brand image and reputation of the firm. The main barriers to non exhibitors firms were costs, bad previous experiences and lack of resources (financial, personnel and time).
Conclusion: A strong motive to exhibit at a trade fair is the reinforcement of the exporter's market presence, particularly in international markets where the comparative costs of other promotional tools are relatively prohibitive. The main barriers to non exhibitors firms are costs associated with the participation in the venue (rents of space and stand, travel and accommodation expenses, etc.), bad experiences on previous trade fairs, and lack of resources (financial, personnel and time).

Keywords: International Trade Fairs (ITF), International Marketing, Promotion Tools, Portuguese Exporting SME's, Motivations/Barriers to participate in ITF, Survey, Portugal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trade shows, trade fairs, consumer shows or mixed shows are not synonymous. According to UFI [1], trade shows are business to business events, where firms in a specific industry can showcase and demonstrate their new products and services. Trade fairs are confined to one industry or a specialized segment of a special industry. Consumer shows are events that are open to the general public, where exhibitors are retail outlets, manufacturers or service organizations looking to bring their products and services directly to the end user. Mixed shows are a combination of trade and public shows. AUMA [2] defines trade fairs as market events of a specific duration held at intervals, at which – with a predominant appeal to trade visitors – a large number of companies present the main product range of one or more sectors of industry and mainly sell to commercial buyers on the basis of samples. Although the term trade fair is more used in Europe and trade show in the United States, for the purpose of the current study these terms are used interchangeable, representing opportunities for firms interested in promoting their products and services internationally.
Trade fairs are not a new marketing promotion tool, but over the last years the global trade fair industry has grown dramatically worldwide. The total indoor exhibition space available in 2009 was 32.6 million m^2, and the highest was offered by Europe (48%), North America (24%), and Asia (20%). In terms of countries, five of them (USA, China, Germany, Italy and France) account for 59% of the total world indoor exhibition space [1]. The main international

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industry association was founded in 1925, in Milan (Italy), and in 2003 it becomes the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry (UFI), including 540 members (www.ufi.org).

The importance of trade fairs for firms will vary depending upon their size and the country of origin. For SME's (small and medium-sized enterprises) trade fairs play a unique role, because they take company personnel to foreign markets, allowing firms to collect market information, and assess market opportunities [3,4]. For small countries, as Portugal, facing a severe financial and economic crisis increasing exports is a priority. In 2011, a total number of 19.837 exporting firms are registered in the Portuguese Statistical Institute (INE), more 12% than in the year before. The need to increase this number in the future is paramount for the growth of the economy and the balance of payments, as Portugal experienced trade deficits in the past thirty years. For many Portuguese firms the domestic market has reached the point at which supply is exceeding demand. This is due to reductions in domestic growth, and increasing competition in local market. Consequently, research into the role of trade fairs as a mean to enter new international markets is of value to Portuguese firms who already exports, but also for those in the early or pre-exportation stage. Research is also needed as a scarce number of studies have been developed in the last years focused on the Portuguese reality [5,6] and none, to our best knowledge, has emphasized the managers' motivations and inhibiting factors to participate (or not) at international trade fairs.

Although some studies have contributed to understand what might motivate firms to exhibit their products or services at international fairs, researchers have paid less attention to the specific reasons that encourage SMEs to become involved in those venues. Firstly, because participants in trade fairs invariably have differing objectives, depending on their size, experience, country of origin, products/services, and market focus. Secondly, the participating firms have to take the opportunity that fairs provide for selling and non-selling activities (information gathering, image building, relationship-building and motivational). Thirdly, the trade-off between perceived costs and benefits is subjective in nature as firms must be involved in pre-fair promotion, at-fair selling and after-fair follow-up activities to take full advantage of the exhibition. Finally, the resources allocated by each firm (booth size, location, design, attention-getting techniques, booth personnel) may influence the perception of success. The objectives of the study were twofold. First, we want to find out what are the rationale and preferences of the Portuguese managers of SMEs about their participation at international trade fairs. Second, it would be important to identify the motivations that underlying the Portuguese SMEs' participation in those venues.

The role of trade fairs in the communication mix of the firms has been analyzed in international and global marketing textbooks. Johansson [7] refers to the international trade fairs stating that are excellent promotional avenues for the global marketer. Albaum, Strandskov and Duerr [8] argue that trade fairs and exhibitions are extremely important for some industries and some countries. Kotabe and Helsen [9] stress that trade shows are a "vital part of the communication package for many international business to business marketers". Onkvisit and Shaw [10] indicate overseas product exhibitions as one type of sales promotions that can be highly effective. In general terms, trade fairs are events that bring together, in a single location, a group of suppliers, distributors and related services who set up physical exhibits of their products and services from a given industry or discipline [11].

Trade fairs are an important tool in the international promotion strategy of the small and medium-sized firms. In the early phases of the exporting process, trade fairs create an opportunity for considerable learning to take place, both about foreign markets, and the level of competition on the industry. Many contact activities takes place during the fair, but contact development and interaction with industry continues after the trade fair.

The first book specifically about trade fairs has been written by Norman [12], and still is a reference on the theme. Several other books followed to help firms on how to exhibit at trade fairs [13], on making their presence more effective [14] and successful [15, 16], or describing the tasks of exposition management [17, 18].

Norman [12] proposed a three stage process for planning a participation in a trade fair (before, during and after) that was followed by different authors such as Miller [14]; Viegas [6]; Appleyard [13]; Rhonda and Bozdech [19]; CEIR [20]; and, Donelson [21]. These authors agree that planning is the best procedure to develop a coherent and efficient participation in a trade fair in order to obtain the maximum return on investment. Also, empirical research has shown that a successful participation in a trade fair demands a strategic planning in all the stages of the event [22, 5, 23].

The aims for exhibiting at international trade fairs can be usually divided into selling and non-selling activities. Selling activities include lead generation, closing sales, finding new customers, qualifying leads and prospecting. Non-selling activities are broadly categorized as meeting existing customers, enhancing the image of the company, carrying out general market research, meeting new distributors or agents, launching new products and even enhancing staff morale [24, 25, 26]. Parasuraman [27] and O'Hara [28] consider the participation in a trade fair the second best tool of marketing, just after personal selling, as the mean to influence the buying decisions of customers.

Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo [29] identify several advantages to trade fair participation: i) the large number of qualified interested people that received the promotional message; ii) the possibility of introducing new products to a large number of prospects; iii) the potential customers that can be discovered; iv) the enhance goodwill to the firm; and, v) the opportunity of free publicity to the firm. A systematic approach to the advantages of participating in an international trade fair indicates the identification of potential customers, the increase of customer loyalty, the introduction of new products to a large number of prospects, the reinforcement and improvement of corporate image, the gathering of competitor information, and selling [30, 31, 24, 32, 33, 14, 19, 34, 35]. An additional advantage, according to Trade Show Bureau [36] is the average cost per contact at a fair which remained consistently one third of the cost of personal sales call. However, although the many advantages that trade fairs have, some drawbacks can be pointed out. The costs involved (space rental, freight, booth personal travel, and living expenses) still are expensive [36, 37]. The proliferation of trade fairs in terms of number, frequency, market focus, and specialization are confusing the exhibitors who need to be more selective and conscious about the cost/benefit analysis.

Berne and Garcia-Uceda [38] studied the criteria used by potential exhibitors and visitors in their ex-ante evaluation of trade shows. The basic features suggested by the review of the literature on trade show evaluation and selection are: i) perception of information on trade shows, including type of trade show, convenience of the location and timing, the trade show reputation and its management, the anticipated quantity and quality of attendance; ii) marketing objectives of the firm, including customer acquisition and retention, interaction with the distribution network, product scanning and marketing research; iii) the perceived costs deriving from attending trade shows (relative and differential costs).

Blythe [34] specify three strategies and nine tactics for exhibitors interested in participating in a trade fair: the strategy of selling, includes take orders, generate leads and make useful contacts; the strategy of communication (outbound), includes image enhancing, product information and establishing a product or company presence; the strategy of communication (inbound), includes meeting existing customers, identifying new customers and observing the competition. On the side of visitors, Blythe [34] identify three strategies and eleven tactics: one of them (gather brochures) is common to all strategies (sources of supply, information sources, and entertainment). The other tactics include place orders, make appointments, sough and unsought information, analyse offers, gather free gifts, go to demonstrations and observe displays [34]. Tanner Jr. [39] adverts that the success factors are mainly strategic, suggesting the centralization in one specific function with the responsibility of define, plan and implement the firm participation in all the fairs that take place annually. Miller [15] reinforces this idea, detaching the role of booth personnel in the success of the fair. The author indicates ways to approach attendees, establish conversation

and agreements, increase the quality of the interaction, identify business opportunities, and capture contact information.

Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo [29] studied the differences between trade show exhibitors and non-exhibitors to conclude that distinct significant characteristics exist. The exhibitors have large, international-oriented industrial companies with many customers, technically complex goods, a high degree of customization and relatively expensive goods. On the contrary, the more portable a product is, the more simple, the less tangible, the less technical, the more inexpensive a product is, the greater the likelihood to non-exhibit. In the same study, Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo [29] have shown that exhibitors correlate almost perfectly with trade show advantages and non-exhibitors negatively so. One major inhibitor for small businesses still is the cost of participation in a trade show. Nonetheless, the causal link between size of the firm and the decision to participate or not in a trade fair, need more empirical support, as the results of the current research are weak [24, 40, 39]. In Canada, a study about collective versus individual participation in a trade fair, found that size and age of the firm are not discriminating factors [40]. However, it is expected that small firms participated annually in a lesser number of fairs than the bigger firms [41].

Hansen [42], researching the motivations to participate or not in a trade fair underlines the enhancement of the corporate image, the collection of competitor information, the introduction or test of new products/services, the loyalty of current customers, the selling of products/services, and the identification of potential customers.

The motivations for trade fair participation were also investigated by Kijewski and Yoon [43]. These authors have identified five reasons that affect the exhibitor decisions: exhibition performance, marketing mix strategies, exhibition profile, costs of participation and human resources capacity. They found that firms are searching for trade fairs not only in a perspective of marketing and selling implementation, but also for considering the trade fairs as a platform of communication and relationship channels construction [44, 42]. A convincing reason for that is pointed out by Blythe [34] who states that the majority of attendees are not firm's buyers, but influent persons in organizations that have the buying or prescriptive power in the decision making process. Therefore, the traditional emphasis on selling must be change to a marketing relationship approach.

To make a trade fair more effective, managers must control and evaluate their participation at an exhibition. Hansen [45, 46] presents a five dimension scale: an outcome-based sales dimension and four behavior-based dimensions, including information-gathering, relationship-building, image-building, and motivation activities. More recently, Shi, Smith and Zhang [47] develop a four-dimension framework (sales-relational, psychological-related, market-exploring, and competitive-intelligence) to examine trade show performance against six trade show marketing strategies (visitor-attraction techniques, number of exhibited products, booth size, booth staff number, booth staff training and follow-up contacts).

The previous participation in a fair seems to be an important factor either for experience or inexperienced firms as the aims of each are very different [48]. In both cases, the vivid experience of the exhibitor, the perceived advantages of being at the fair networking with current and potential customers, and the presence face-to-face with direct competitors stimulates the return to the next fair [49, 50, 51]. Kang and Schrier [41] indicate that as experience increases exhibitors are more prompt to be less satisfied. The authors recommend more attention to event organizers, as they must be keen of the fact and able to define marketing strategies to correct those attitudes. One of the strategies, suggest the creation of a network of trade contacts available to exhibitors, allowing the access to a list of potential buyers [52]. Nevertheless, satisfied exhibitors are more prompt to return in future editions of the fair, as they perceived a lower risk of participation [53].

A substantial number of corporate executives still perceive trade fairs as a non-selling activity or a social event for those employees that attend [54]. The effectiveness of a fair could be questioned, sometimes because the firms are unable to measure the return on their trade fair investment. Blackwell [55] proposes a ratio (ROI - Return on Investment), as a

process to evaluate the performance of the firm's presence at an exhibition. The author recognizes difficulties in the ROI calculation, as many variables are involved when a specific trade fair is considered. Bettis-Outland, Cromartie, Johnston and Borders [56] add the index of Return on Trade Show Information (RTSI) that describes both tangible and intangible benefits that accrue to the firm as a result of information acquired at trade fairs. However, the authors advert that in some cases, the same information that is acquired at trade shows is also available from alternative sources, potentially making it difficult to determine true RTSI [56].

In a scenario analysis, Kirchgeorg, Jung and Klante [52] suggest that trade shows will continue to be an integral and indispensable part of the marketing mix of the companies. However, trade show companies should continue to move away from selling space and instead become information brokers who facilitate the networking and interaction of market players.

The following section outline the methodology and the study undertaken, and the results obtained.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted in Portugal and sought to examine the firm's behavior regarding international trade fairs. In the preliminary stage of the research process an informal exploratory study was undertaken. First, several unstructured personal interviews were made to managers of exporting firms and fair organizers in order to understand the intricacies of the research problem. Simultaneously, the researcher visited two international trade fairs: one in Madrid (Fitur, 2012), and the other in Paris (Moison & Object, 2012) to directly observed the behavior of exhibitors, attendees and the atmosphere of a trade fair. Since the problem is subjective in perception, a questionnaire was used as data collection instrument.

The questionnaire contained three parts. The first part is oriented towards the firms that already has been in an international trade fair, and included: i) questions about the operational and tactical decisions of the firms' participation; ii) two lists of typical reasons and decision factors - the first list was measured in a preference scale from 1 (most preferred) to 5 (least preferred), and the second list used a five-point Likert scale; iii) questions about the communication tools used by firms during the fair.

The second part of the questionnaire was only applied to non-participant firms, and included two lists: one, with the possible reasons to not participate, measured by a five-point Likert scale; the other one, with the factors that could alter the non-participation decision of the firm, measured by a preference scale from 1 (most critical) to 5 (least critical). The third part is common to both participating and non participating firms and contained the characteristics of the respondent firms, including sector of activity, size (number of employees and total sales), international experience (number of years in international markets) and international involvement (proportion of exports on sales and number of international markets). All the lists used in the questionnaire were derived from those identified in previous studies in the area.

To select the Portuguese exporting firms for the study the researcher used a random sampling process, based on secondary data from public (AICEP) and private business and trade associations (AEP, AIP, ATP, APICCAPS, APIMA). The questionnaire was sent by e-mail or post, between January 20th and July 30th of 2012, to 1108 marketing managers responsible to handle exporting activities. After a telephone recall to non-respondents, a total of 68 usable questionnaires was used, which correspond to a response rate of 6.14%.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the firms that participated in the study. As can be seen, the composition of the sample goes beyond the manufacturing sector to include tourism, construction and many other sectors. Further, the size of the firms by Portuguese standards, varies between small (less than 100 employees) to medium (more than 100

employees). The total volume of sales can be equally divided with half of the firms below €10 million and the other half above € 10 million. Most of the respondents firms (87.9%) have international experience (more than 3 years), have been exporting to a diversified set of markets (32.3% for more than 20 markets) and the weight of exports on total sales are significant (more than 50% in 46.2% of the firms).

Table 1. Sample profile

Characteristics	**Proportion (n = 68)** (a)
Sector of activity	
Construction	12.1
Textile and Shoes	9.1
Furniture and Decoration	19.7
Tourism	7.6
Others	51.5
Number of employees	
Less than 20	15.1
21 - 50	18.2
51 – 100	21.2
More than 100	45.5
Total volume of sales (€)	
Less than 500.000	7.5
500.000 – 2.499.999	18.2
2.500.000 – 10.000.000	27.3
More than 10.000.000	47.0
International Experience	
Less than 1 year	3.0
1 – 3 years	3.0
More than 3 years	87.9
Never exported	6.1
Percentage of exports on sales	
0% - 20%	24.6
21% - 50%	29.2
51% - 100%	46.2
Number of export markets	
0 – 5 countries	27.7
6 – 20 countries	40.0
More than 20 countries	32.3

Note: (a) Totals may be less than 68 as respondents did not complete all questions.

Preliminary analysis of the survey data using SPSS and *chi-square* tests revealed that there were no statistical significant relationships between firms characteristics (sector of activity, size by number of employees or total sales, volume of exports on total sales, number of export markets) and the participation or not in international trade fairs. The only variable showing a significant difference ($p<0.01$) was international experience, as suggested earlier in previous empirical evidence [40]. Therefore, the sample proved to be relatively homogeneous and further data analysis was undertaken.

3. RESULTS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of table 2 show that overall the most important motives to participate in international trade fairs are the reinforcement of the market presence of Portuguese exporting firms (17.5%), the improvement of the image and reputation of the firm/brand

(16.3%), and the opportunity to introduce and promote new products and services (15.4%). The least considered motives were disappointment regarding the organization and impact of trade fairs on the business of the firm, the imitation of the direct competitors, and exporting firms' routines regard the trade fairs as a promotion strategy.

A deeper analysis of the most important motives shows that the reinforcement of market presence in the country where the international trade fair takes place is the first choice motive for 16 respondents, well above of any other factor. Another important factor is the enhancement of the image and reputation of the brand/firm among present and future customers, but also among competitors. It appears that Portuguese firm's are very conscious of the negative effects that the absence of a trade show could have on current customers' perception and the benefits attached of being at a fair. Further, ranking high on the preferences of respondents are increase customer loyalty, and the interest in promoting innovation and test new products (68.8% and 64.5% in the first three choices, respectively).

Table 2. Motives for participation in international fairs

Reasons	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice	N	%
Reinforce market presence	16 (38.0)	9 (21.4)	7 (16.6)	4 (9.6)	6 (14.4)	42 (100.0)	17.5
Save costs due to a better relation cost per contact	2 (10.0)	4 (20.0)	5 (25.0)	3 (15.0)	6 (30.0)	20 (100.0)	8.3
Customer loyalty	5 (15.6)	6 (18.8)	11 (34.4)	5 (15.6)	5 (15.6)	32 (100.0)	13.3
Promote innovation, test new products	6 (19.4)	9 (29.0)	5 (16.2)	7 (22.6)	4 (12.9)	31 (100.0)	12.9
Tool to promote and introducing new products or services	5 (13.5)	5 (13.5)	8 (21.6)	11 (29.8)	8 (21.6)	37 (100.0)	15.4
Increase sales and customer portfolio	5 (17.3)	4 (13.7)	5 (17.3)	9 (31.0)	6 (20.7)	29 (100.0)	12.1
Improve brand image and reputation	6 (15.4)	9 (23.0)	6 (15.4)	11 (28.3)	7 (17.9)	39 (100.0)	16.3
Firm's routine	0	0	3 (100.0)	0	0	3 (100.0)	1.3
Imitation of competition	1 (25.0)	1 (25.0)	2 (50.0)	0	0	4 (100.0)	1.6
Disappointment with trade fairs	1 (33.3)	0	1 (33.3)	0	1 (33.3)	3 (99.9)	1.3
Totals						240	100.0

Note: Totals may be less than 51 as respondents did not complete all questions.

Somewhat unexpectedly, increase sales and expand customer portfolio ranked moderate on the motives of firms, which clearly denotes that make direct sales is not of paramount importance for participants, although 5 of them considered a first choice motive. Similarly, ranking below the expectations was one pivotal function attached to trade shows, which is, being a place to the promotion and introduction of new products. According to 20 respondents the cost per contact seems to be undervalued when a final decision must to be taken.

Table 3 suggests that costs was the major barrier to participation in an international trade fair, with a mean response of 4.06, and 6 respondents answering "strongly agree" with the statement that "costs of trade fair's participation are high and the return on investment difficult to obtain". This is a frequently cited disadvantage to not participate in trade fairs [24, 39, 43]. Another intrinsic reason associated with the organization of the fairs was bad previous experiences (mean score of 3) which seems to marked negatively some of the respondents (5 firms reported agree or strongly agree).

Table 3. Inhibiting factors to firm participation in international fairs (n = 16)

Reasons	SD	D	NA/D	A	SA	Mean (S.D.)
Trade fairs are old-fashioned	1	4	8	3	0	2.81 (0.834)
Costs of participation	0	1	3	6	6	4.06 (0.929)
Bad previous experiences in trade fairs	1	4	6	4	1	3.00 (1.033)
The firm has no financial resources to participate	2	5	3	4	2	2.94 (1.289)
The firm has no qualified human resources to participate	3	7	3	3	0	2.38 (1.025)
The direct competition of the firm is in the same space	7	4	4	0	1	2.00 (1.155)
Trade fairs are time consuming	1	7	4	4	0	2.69 (0.946)
Firm's sector of activity is not present in fairs	2	4	4	2	4	3.13 (1.408)
Disappointment about trade fairs organizations	2	3	7	4	0	2.81 (0.981)
Don't know about trade fairs	5	7	3	1	0	2.00 (0.894)

Note: Note: Totals may be less than 17 as respondents did not complete all questions.
(SA) Strongly Disagree; (D) Disagree; (NA/D) Neither Agree nor Disagree; (A) Agree; (SA) Strongly Agree.

Some other important reasons are firm-specific, such as lack of financial resources (mean score of 2.94), need of qualified human resources (mean score of 2.38), and time-consuming process for the firm (mean score of 2.69). It seems that focus only upon resources and capabilities as the foundation for a firm's promotion strategy could limit its long-term success. The ability to establish relationships with new customers, gather information about competitors, partners and new products could make a difference over international direct competitors. Therefore, the trade fair participation must be envisaged as a long term promotional strategy rather than short term, oriented towards customer relationships building, and brand image and firm reputation enhancement.

As seen on table 4, more competitive costs are the most important change factor cited by a total of 15 (20.6%) respondents, as a factor that could change the decision to not participate in an international fair. This perception reinforces the idea already expended that costs are a critical inhibiting factor to many non-participant firms. Another important factor was more financial support from the government (12.3%) which is available for Portuguese firms on a competitive basis, particularly for exporting firms. Of course that government aid is always short, but firm's specific problem such as internal reorganization could disqualify the desired support.

Other changing factors were specifically related to trade fair organizers. A better communication of the fair to prospects and the transparency and credibility of the organizer are both evaluated equally important (12.3%). The improvement of the location of the stands in the space of the fair, and more activities during the fair (seminars, workshops) were all suggestions to attract potential new exhibitors. The remaining factors were seen as the least important.

Table 4. Drivers of change to become exhibitor (n = 16)

Factors	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3th Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice	N	%
Transparency and credibility of trade fairs organizations	3 (33.4)	2 (22.2)	2 (22.2)	2 (22.2)	0	9 (100.0)	12.3
Better advertising and promotion of the fair	2 (22.2)	3 (33.4)	2 (22.2)	1 (11.1)	1 (11.1)	9 (100.0)	12.3
Costs more competitive	7 (46.6)	4 (26.6)	1 (6.7)	1 (6.7)	2 (13.4)	15 (100.0)	20.6
More parallel activities, such as seminars, workshops, etc.	1 (14.3)	1 (14.3)	2 (28.6)	3 (42.8)	0	7 (100.0)	9.6
Firm's internal reorganization	1 (12.5)	0	2 (25.0)	3 (37.5)	2 (25.0)	8 (100.0)	11.0
More financial support from the government	0	2 (22.2)	2 (22.2)	2 (22.2)	3 (33.4)	9 (100.0)	12.3
Improve location of stands in the fair	1 (14.2)	0	2 (28.6)	0	4 (57.2)	7 (100.0)	9.6
Dislike trade fairs	2 (100.0)	0	0	0	0	2 (100.0)	2.7
Lack motivation or incentive to participate	0	1 (100.0)	0	0	0	1 (100.0)	1.4
Other	0	4	0	1	1	6	8.2
Total						73	100.0

Table 5 shows that 75% of exporting firms prefer to participate individually in an international trade fair on a foreign country or in Portugal. This individual approach assures the total control of the marketing objectives of the firm, the personalization of the stand, and a more focused attention to visitors. The joint participation of different SME's belonging to the same industry is less frequent for exporters (25%), and the initiative usually comes from the government (Portuguese Agency for Investment and External Commerce - AICEP) or from trade or industrial associations. Nevertheless, many of the respondents (53.1%) see benefits in this type of participation. When asked about the importance of collectively participate in a trade fair, the majority of respondents (61.4%) see it as a strong contribution to reinforce the participation or even allow for the first time presence of a domestic firm in an international fair. Without support of government or industry associations many of the firms hardly have financial or organizational resources to apply to an international trade fair. On the contrary, some of the firms (38.6%) regarded joint participation as a limitation on their selling and marketing actions during the fair, reducing the possibilities of differentiation vis-à-vis competition. Almost all the firms have experience of exhibiting their products or services in

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an international trade fair to current customers and prospects (94.1%). Only 5.9% of the firms said that it was the first time that they have been involved in an international trade fair.

Table 5. Exhibitor's behavior in international fairs

Variables	Number	Percentage
Individual participation		
Yes	51	75.0
No	17	25.0
Collective participation		
Yes	26	53.1
No	23	46.9
Interest of collective participation		
No, limits individual actions	17	38.6
Yes, reinforces participation	22	50.0
Yes, only way to participate	5	11.4
How many fairs annually		
First time	3	5.9
1 to 3	23	45.1
More than 3	25	49.0
Change stand between fairs		
Never	3	6.0
Always	17	34.0
From time to time	7	14.0
Random	23	46.0
Pre-fair preparation		
Less than 2 months	10	17.8
3 – 5 Months	27	52.9
More than 5 months	14	27.5
Marketing before the fair		
Yes	48	96.0
No	2	4.0
Return on investment		
During the fair	4	8.3
One month later	13	27.1
Half year later	22	45.8
One year later	7	14.6
More than 1 year	2	4.2

Note: Totals may be less than 68 as respondents did not complete all questions.

Most of the exhibitors (80.4%) made pre-fair arrangements before the show took place, including choose the location, define the booth size and the layout of the stand, and elaborate the promotion materials to attract attention, stimulate interest, and increase the number of visits to firm exhibits. Also marketing actions before the fair, such as sending invitations to current customers and prospects, and promoting the event in the website of the firm assume relevance in the communication-mix strategy. These actions are essential to inform customers about the trade fair and give them a free pass to meet with representatives of the firm. The return on investment of the international trade fair is moderated during the fair (8.3) and increases significantly (one to six months) after the end of the fair (72.9%). After one year the effects of the fair decreases to 4.2% and the firms need to repeat the virtuous cycle.

3.1 Managerial Implications

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The findings are suggestive of at least four important managerial implications. From the organizer point of view, assessing visitor and exhibitor satisfaction on several relevant topics could be important, not only to stand visitor profile analysis, but also to measure and monitor the success of a trade fair in a broadest sense.

From the exhibitor side, the access to information regarding the event, such as the analysis of the visitor records, the assessment of competitors performance, the effectiveness of the advertisement for the trade fair (TV, press, catalogues, etc.), the efficiency of the ratio between the number of invitation sent out and the number of visitors are all sensible areas that could increase exhibitor satisfaction and retention.

From a national export assistance policy perspective, the formulation of meaningful assistance programs implies to be aware of the factors that influenced exporting firms to become involved in international trade fairs and also the reasons why non-exhibitor firms decide against involvement. While it is necessary to provide information, training, and resources to exporting firms to overcome barriers, it is also essential to highlight the benefits of exhibiting in a way that ensures non exhibitors respond positively to assistance. It is necessary to look at motives and barriers as part of a total incentive system rather than to treat them independently.

Finally, the attitude towards the international trade fair participation varies between Portuguese exporting firms. Some of them regard joint participation as a limitation in their selling and marketing actions, others as an opportunity to reinforce their international market presence. Most of the Portuguese exhibitors plan the participation before, during and after the fair takes place, but the return on the investment of the trade fair only achieve its peak after the fair (one to six months). Therefore, it is crucial that exhibiting firms took a long term approach when evaluating the return on the investment of a particular trade fair, as most of the results are intangible (image, reputation) and not immediately measurable.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to examine perceived motives and decision factors of Portuguese exporting firms to participate or not in an international trade fair. A strong motive to exhibit at a trade fair is the reinforcement of the exporter's market presence, particularly in international markets where the comparative costs of other promotional tools are relatively prohibitive. In descending order, the Portuguese exhibitors indicated the possibility of finding new ideas and test new products during the event, the establishment of sustainable relationships with important customer, the enhancement of the brand image and reputation of the firm. Contrary to expectations, increase sales and expand the customer portfolio ranked moderate, while promotion and introduction of new products ranked low on the motives of Portuguese exhibitors. The main barriers to non exhibitors firms are costs associated with the participation in the venue (rents of space and stand, travel and accommodation expenses, etc.), bad experiences on previous trade fairs, and lack of resources (financial, personnel and time). To overcome these barriers the non exhibitors suggest lessen costs, mainly by appealing to the support of governmental agencies (in the Portuguese case AICEP). Other barriers refer to the difficulties in choosing a better stand location inside the venue, the weak impact of the trade fair in the media, the reputation of the trade fair organizer and the animation during the fair.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the managers who kindly respond to the questionnaire.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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