

**WHAT IS MARKETING FOR SME ENTREPRENEURS?
THE NEED TO MARKET THE MARKETING APPROACH**

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Acknowledgements: The Authors would like to thank Giorgina Costantino, Elisabetta Galletti, and Roberta Vergari for their support in data collection and codification.

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Abstract. In Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), the adoption of the marketing approach is conditioned by entrepreneurs' own conception of marketing, which may be substantially different from that proposed, in a paradigmatic way, by academics under different names (i.e., the *transactional*, *relationship*, or *inductional marketing*). This implies that the potential benefits for SMEs, coming from its adoption, rely upon what entrepreneurs really do when they *think* they are implementing a marketing programme. Hence, the purpose of the present paper is twofold: (1) To shed light on SME entrepreneurs' conception of marketing, in order to verify whether their interpretation differs from that proposed by marketing researchers; and (2) To assess quantitatively the psychological determinants of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a "marketing approach" (i.e., what they mean by that), by applying a well-known model for predicting both human and organizational behaviors (i.e., Ajzen's [1991] *Theory of Planned Behavior*, TPB). Results of this study carried out on more than 200 Italian SMEs showed that: (1) most Italian SME entrepreneurs possess a misconception of the marketing concept in comparison with the conceptualization proposed by academic researchers; and (2) *subjective norm*, which in organization contexts can be interpreted as an indicator of *corporate culture* (i.e., the pattern of shared values and beliefs about organizational functioning) (cf. Elliott and Jobber 1995), seems to be the main determinant of the Italian SME entrepreneurs' intention to adopt the marketing approach. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Corporate culture; Marketing approach; Small and Medium Enterprise, Theory of planned behavior

WHAT IS MARKETING FOR SME ENTREPRENEURS? THE NEED TO MARKET THE MARKETING APPROACH

1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are among the main constituents of Western economies and represent the most widespread type of business organization in Europe and, particularly, in Italy. Traditionally, SMEs base their competitiveness on a number of factors, such as: their tendency to concentrate in particular regional areas, giving rise to peculiar Marshallian industrial districts; and their high degree of specialization and flexibility, resulting from their informal organization, wherein the entrepreneur usually represents the sole decision maker. Yet, in the last few years, due to some emerging drivers of market-change (e.g., the markets' internationalization, the increasingly global competition, the diffusion of ICT), their traditional factors of success (i.e., agglomeration, specialization, and flexibility) have lost their strategic relevance in favor of other key-factors (e.g., innovation and marketing orientation). Because of these drivers of market-change, which have given rise to a proliferation of products and services in the marketplace at decreasing cost levels, cost-cutting strategies have become less effective and Italian SMEs have been challenged to focus on the intangible attributes of their offers, by integrating goods (i.e., the tangible aspects of offers) with services (i.e., the intangible aspects of offers) (Guido 1999), thus providing psychological benefits and consumption experiences to customers, in order to achieve a competitive advantage of differentiation. To this end, a market or – in a stricter sense – a marketing orientation, that is, the adoption of a marketing approach (i.e., the so-called “marketing concept”), becomes crucial for enabling local firms to reach better performances and a sustainable competitive advantage in the long run. Yet, recent research (e.g., Liu 2005; Verhees and Meulenbergh 2004) has shown that, compared with larger firms, SMEs tend to be more reluctant to adopt a marketing approach mainly because of a lack of resources and skills. In particular, since SMEs usually lack marketing specialists and their owners/managers (i.e., the SME entrepreneurs) are usually the sole decision makers, the choice to adopt (or not) a marketing approach relies on what they *think* marketing is and their expectancies about the consequences of the adoption of such an approach in their organizations. This means that its use is evaluated subjectively, according to the entrepreneurs' perceptions, contexts, and

mental schemes about marketing (cf. Guido 2001b). This is in line with the recent research in this field (e.g., Becherer, Halstead and Haynes 2003; Carson and Gilmore 2000), which has stressed the importance of the inherent characteristics of SMEs entrepreneurs in the choice to adopt (or not) such an approach. On the one hand, more adaptive (that is, conservative and less innovative) entrepreneurs are likely to reject the adoption of the marketing approach in their organizations, since it would represent an innovation in itself and, as such, may be perceived as too risky (cf. Marcati, Guido and Peluso 2006). On the other hand, also due to the peculiar characteristics of small firms (such as organizational flexibility, specialization, but also the lack of resources, marketing knowledge and skills), SME entrepreneurs who choose to adopt the marketing approach are likely to implement something that is substantially different from the marketing in larger firms. In fact, whilst marketing decision-making processes in the latter kind of organizations tend to be formal and highly structured, in small firms, such processes tend to be simple, informal, instinctive, and, thus, also different from the theoretical paradigms developed in the managerial literature (Carson 2000). Some authors (e.g., Carson 1985; Chaston 1997M; Hill and Wright 2000) have referred to this “haphazard” marketing approach often adopted in SMEs as *entrepreneurial marketing*, thus stressing its intuitive and situation-specific nature, as well as its implementation without a pre-planning activity.

In order to provide insights on how the adoption of a marketing approach in Italian SMEs can be encouraged, it is important to understand: whether the entrepreneurs’ conception of marketing differs from that developed by researchers and which are the psychological factors capable of influencing the entrepreneurs’ intention to adopt a marketing approach. Therefore, the present paper addresses two research objectives: (1) to shed light on the potential discrepancy between the conception of marketing possessed by Italian SME entrepreneurs and that developed by academic researchers; and (2) to investigate – by means of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (TPB) (Ajzen 1991) – the psychological determinants of the entrepreneurs’ intention to adopt a marketing approach. In the next section, different marketing approaches proposed in literature will be reviewed; in Section 3, research objectives and methodology will be presented; in Section 4, results obtained from statistical analyses will be reported; and, finally, in Section 5, both theoretical and managerial implications will be discussed.

2. The Evolution of the Marketing Concept in the Academic Literature

In order to investigate what SME entrepreneurs really *think* a marketing approach is, it seems necessary to recall what a marketing approach is for academic researchers. Since its first definition, provided in 1935 by the National Association of Marketing Teachers (an American Marketing Association [AMA] predecessor), according to which marketing consisted in “the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers” (Keefe 2004, p. 17), the marketing concept has evolved through three main different frameworks – *transactional*, *relationship*, and *inductional* – which can be traced in the academic literature in a paradigmatic way. Although they still co-exist in practice and can be used by a given organization also in a complementary fashion, in relation to specific contingent factors (e.g., the strategic relevance of the customer) (e.g., Coviello *et al.* 2002; Fruchter and Sigué 2005), these three approaches, briefly described in the following sub-sections, are based on different assumptions and principles, thus positioning marketing at different organizational levels – i.e., respectively, treating marketing as a function, a strategy, and a firm’s orientation.

2.1. The Transactional Marketing Approach

From a chronological point of view, the *transactional marketing* was the first approach to be developed in literature. Its name, “transactional”, is due to its theoretical focus on the *exchange* concept, implemented through the so-called *marketing mix* paradigm, developed by McCarthy (1960) and referred to the mixture of those elements (the *4Ps*: *Product*, *Price*, *Promotion*, and *Place*) useful in pursuing a certain market response.

Although the *marketing mix* paradigm still dominates the existing AMA definition of the marketing concept, according to which “marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchange and satisfy individual and organization objectives” (Keefe 2004, p. 17), in the last decades it has undergone criticisms, which principally stressed among its weaknesses: (1) its theoretical flaws (Grönroos 1994); (2) its departure from the *exchange* concept (Yudelson 1999); (3) the lack of a mutual exclusivity among the four categories (i.e., the *4Ps*) driving its implementation (Van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte 1992); (4) its obsolescence, due to a production-oriented definition of marketing (Dobscha and Foxman 1998; Gummesson 1998);

(5) its restricted theoretical domain, because of its focus only on the 4Ps, neglecting many other marketing activities (Hyman 2004); (6) its functional, rather than strategic, role (Grönroos 2002); and (7) its focus only on the purchase phase of the consumption experience (Dobscha and Foxman 1998). Because of these theoretical limitations, a new approach was proposed during the '80s, the so-called *relationship marketing* approach, even though the *marketing mix* paradigm still resists in practice and education, as a pedagogical simplification.

2.2. The Relationship Marketing Approach

In light of previous criticisms against *transactional marketing* – stressing its short-term orientation, its functional perspective, and its focus on the *producer/seller*, rather than on final consumers and other parts – as well as because of the end of the mass-production era, a new marketing approach was proposed in the academic literature during the eighties. This approach, initially developed by the so-called Swedish Marketing School in the field of industrial and service marketing and, later, proposed also in consumer marketing, was referred to as *relationship marketing*, because of its focus on the concept of *relationship* between the organization and its external counterparts (e.g., customers in the strict sense, and also suppliers, distributors, and competitors) as well as internal ones (e.g., managers and employees) (cf. Berry 1983; Grönroos 1994). According to this approach, marketing should be repositioned at a strategic level, rather than at a functional one, and all organization counterparts and members, at each level, should be considered as *customers* (in a broader sense) and, therefore, involved in the relational marketing activities of the firm.

In order to implement this approach, Gummesson (1994) proposed thirty key relationships – the so-called 30Rs model – by which the *relationship marketing* could be successfully achieved. Albeit these research efforts, the implementation of this approach, according to which marketing strategies should pervade *all* organization functions, continues to show some weaknesses. In fact, its application implies that *all* organization members should adopt a *relationship marketing* approach towards their external and/or internal counterparts. This means that, other than the so-called *full-time marketers*, who are employed and trained to perform marketing activities, all the other members of the organization – the so-called *part-time marketers* (e.g., Gummesson 1998) – besides performing their own tasks, should improve relationships with firm counterparts. This “dual task” of all organization members is hard to realize in many firms. First of all, because it would require a great amount

of resources in terms of time and money (Blois 1996). Secondly, due to persisting hierarchical organizational structures in many countries, above all in Latin ones, employees, at each level, tend to be reluctant to collaborate with their employers beyond their duties. Thirdly, if employees are unionized, their collaboration on the building, maintenance, and improvement of firm relationships may be hindered by union demands; similarly, if employees are transient, the investments for their training and development could be considered expensive and unnecessary (Coviello and Brodie 1998). For these reasons, at a practical level, the *relationship marketing* approach has never replaced the *transactional* one completely, but it has been used by firms selectively, depending on a number of factors, such as the strategic relevance of each firm's stakeholder.

2.3. The Inductional Marketing Approach

In the last decade, markets have become more and more structurally turbulent (cf. Kathandaraman and Wilson 2001) and network-centered (Möller and Halinen 1999), because of a number of phenomena (e.g., the globalization of competition; the Internet and other electronic interfaces; the increasingly interdependence and connectedness of markets; the technological complexity and change), which can be considered as drivers of market-change. Therefore, rethinking the marketing concept has emerged as a necessity, in order to face market challenges coming from the new competitive scenario.

Drawing on the so-called *postmodernist* philosophy (cf. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002, for a review), a number of new marketing models have been recently proposed. Even though different in their names and tools, these models are based on the same assumptions (Brown 1995), such as: the increasing consumption of symbols, instead of products; the fragmentation of consumers' needs; the necessity to both customize firms' offers and develop new consumption experiences. All these models seem to share the *inductional* nature of such processes (Guido 2005), so that marketing is used to *induce* final consumers and all other counterparts (such as suppliers, distributors, and competitors) to collaborate profitably with the firm (see also Firat and Dholakia 2006). Under this approach, marketers should manipulate expectancies (i.e., expectations and desires) and perceptions of both final consumers and other firm counterparts, in order to induce them to subscribe a firm's objective and to be well predisposed towards its offers (e.g., inducing final consumers to buy its products) (cf. Zyman 2000).

This *inductional marketing* approach may be operationalized through an *integrated* and *competitive* marketing model, according to which each subject (e.g., the final consumer and/or any other firm counterpart) should be persuaded to collaborate with the organization, being actively involved in its management processes. To do so, the marketing concept needs to be repositioned neither at a functional level (as in the *transactional marketing* approach), nor at a strategic one (as in the *relationship marketing* approach), but as the entire orientation of the firm. As such, each firm, or network of firms, which operates within a structurally turbulent and changing marketplace, can gain and maintain a competitive advantage only to the detriment of its competitors (e.g., Kathandaraman and Wilson 2001).

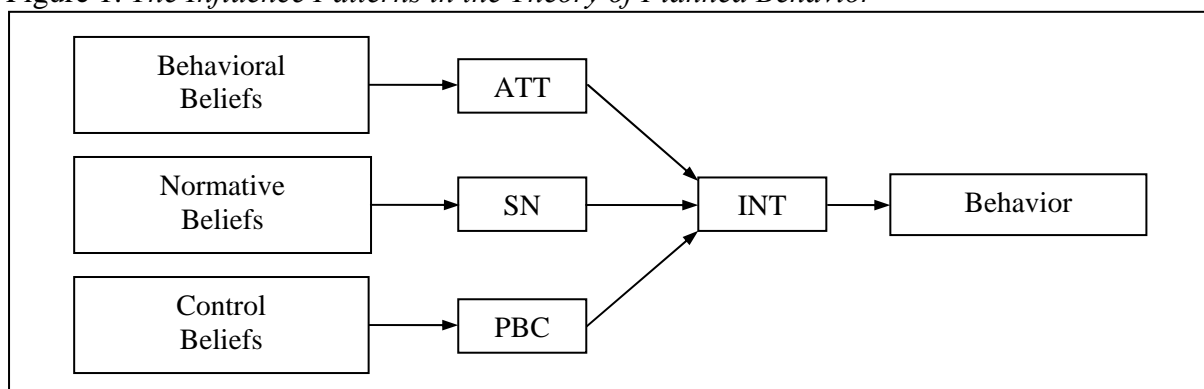
3. Research Objectives and Methodology

In order to encourage the diffusion of the marketing knowledge and, thus, the adoption of a marketing approach among Italian SMEs, it seems important to understand whether and to which extent the marketing concept shared by local entrepreneurs differs from that proposed in the academic literature. Moreover, it seems important to understand which are the psychological determinants of the SME entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach. Thus, the present research tried to address the following twofold objective: (1) to investigate the marketing concept shared by Italian SME entrepreneurs, in comparison to that developed in literature and operationalized by the three different paradigms (the *transactional*, *relationship*, and *inductional marketing*); and (2) to analyse, by means of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (hereafter, TPB) (Ajzen 1991), the cognitive antecedents of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt such a marketing approach.

The TPB (Ajzen 1991) is a model developed in the field of social psychology for predicting human behaviors. Yet, recent studies (e.g., Elliott and Jobber 1995; Guido 2001a, 2002, 2003) have shown that this theory is also appropriate to investigate organizational behaviors. According to Ajzen's (1991) model, the intention to engage in a behavior (i.e., the *intention to adopt a marketing approach*), assumed to be the best predictor of such a behavior, results from the weighted sum of three main determinants: the *attitude*, which is referred to the subjective predisposition towards that behavior; the *subjective norm*, which is the perception of social pressures, put on the perceiver by the so-called relevant others (i.e.,

persons or groups of persons who are important to the perceiver), to perform (or not) such a behavior; and the *perceived behavioral control*, which is referred to one's perception of how easy (or difficult) it is to perform such a behavior (Figure 1). These determinants arise from *salient beliefs*, that is, all the mental associations between an object, or behavior, and its perceived attributes (for a criticism of this definition of *salience*, see Guido 2001b), which, in line with the so-called "expectancy-value" models (cf. Eagly and Chaiken 1993, for a review), are obtained multiplying the subjective probability of the occurrence of some consequences related to the behavior (the expectancy) by the corresponding evaluation (the value) of such a behavior. Therefore, *attitude* results from the so-called *behavioral beliefs*, that is, the sum of products of the subjective probability that the behavior in question will assure specific advantages (or disadvantages) and the relative importance assigned by the perceiver to each of these consequences. *Subjective norm* results from *normative beliefs*, that is, the sum of products of the subjective probability that the behavior will be approved (or disapproved) by relevant others and the corresponding subjective motivation to comply with them. Similarly, *perceived behavioral control* results from *control beliefs*, that is, the sum of products of the subjective probability of certain events that could facilitate (or hinder) the behavior and the corresponding evaluations of the importance of such events in influencing the behavioral intention.

Figure 1: *The Influence Patterns in the Theory of Planned Behavior*



Note: ATT = Attitude; SN = Subjective Norm; PBC = Perceived Behavioral Control; INT = Intention to perform a specific behavior (i.e., the intention to adopt a marketing approach).

The research procedure consisted of two phases: a *pilot study*, aimed to delineate, at an exploratory level, the entrepreneurs' conception of marketing and to collect their salient

beliefs regarding Ajzen's (1991) determinants of the behavioral intention; and the *main study*, aimed to achieve the above-mentioned research objectives.

3.1. Pilot Study

A *pilot study* was carried out to explore the entrepreneurs' conception of marketing, in order to identify the items to be used in the main questionnaire, and to elicit, according to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) procedure, the salient beliefs (i.e., *behavioral*, *normative*, and *control beliefs*) at the basis of Ajzen's (1991) determinants of the behavioral intention (i.e., *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control*, respectively). A sample of 50 Italian SME entrepreneurs, located in the Province of Lecce, Southern Italy, was used. Their firms were homogeneously stratified according to their industrial sectors (Construction, Engineering, Food, Textile-Clothing-Footwear [TCF], and Wholesale), number of employees (1-20, 21-50, 51-120 employees), and level of sales (0-250 thousands Euro, 250-500 thousands Euro, 500 thousands to 2.5 millions Euro, 2.5-5 millions Euro, 5-7.5 millions Euro, and finally more than 7.5 millions Euro). However, due to the lack of cooperation of nine entrepreneurs, the sample was reduced to 41 firms. A preliminary questionnaire was administered, by personal interviews, in an open-ended format, to the 41 entrepreneurs at their firm locations. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first one, six questions on the perception of marketing were asked to participants in order to explore: (1) the subjective meaning attributed to the marketing concept; (2) the function performed by marketing in the organization; (3) the importance of marketing for the organization, in comparison to other functional areas; (4) whether a marketing approach has ever been adopted; (5) (if adopted) how long it is since this approach has been adopted; and (6) the motives of its adoption. In the second part of the questionnaire, three questions concerning the following beliefs associated with the adoption of a marketing approach were asked to participants: (1) expected advantages (or disadvantages) of the adoption of a marketing approach (*behavioral beliefs*); (2) subjects, or groups of subjects, who would approve (or disapprove) the adoption of a marketing approach in the organization (*normative beliefs*); and (3) events that could facilitate (or hinder) such a behavior (*control beliefs*).

Results obtained from a content analysis carried out on participants' answers to the first six questions showed that most entrepreneurs perceive marketing as a functional tool and, more rarely, as predominant over other firm functions (such as Production). More specifically,

according to respondents, marketing consists in a tool, or a tactics to improve consumers' knowledge of the firm and its products (27.3% of cases), to search for new markets (22.7%), to develop sales and firm size (20.5%), to meet consumers' needs (15.9%). More than 30% (i.e., 31.9%) of entrepreneurs assigned no function to marketing or a marginal role (i.e., 43.9%). A substantial part of entrepreneurs indicated, as the main motive of its adoption, the possibility of either favoring the firm's development (i.e., 34%) or enhancing consumers' knowledge of their firm and its products in the marketplace (i.e., 17%). As for the *salient beliefs* (i.e., *behavioral*, *normative*, and *control beliefs*) to be considered in the main questionnaire for measuring Ajzen's (1991) determinants of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach (i.e., *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control*, respectively), results obtained from the content analysis carried out on participants' answers to the related three questions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: *Salient Beliefs to Be Used in the Main Questionnaire (N = 41)*

Behavioral Beliefs (%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advantages To develop new markets (20.4); To develop production and sales (18.6); To improve firm's image and products (14.2); To rationalize costs (i.e., fixed, financial, production) (10.6); To understand competitors better (8.0); To understand markets better (6.2) - Disadvantages To waste time and other resources (24.1); The risk of making mistakes (15.5); The need for employing highly skilled human resources (12.1); Further difficulties in fund rising (10.6)
Normative Beliefs (%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Subjects or groups of subjects influencing the adoption of a marketing approach Top management (28.9); Employees (18.4); Competitors (17.4); Customers (14.5); Financiers (6.5)
Control Beliefs (%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Events facilitating the adoption of a marketing approach A market growth (27.3); Subsidies and interventions by banks or the Government (15.6); An improvement of marketing knowledge within the organization (10.4); An increase in disposable financial resources (9.1) - Events hindering the adoption of a marketing approach Unexpected difficulties in fund rising (23.4); A markets' crisis (20.3); The necessity to modify existing strategies (13); Organizational inertia (9.4); An enhancement of tax pressure (6.3); Difficulties in employing marketing experts (6.3)

3.2. Main Study

The *main study* was carried out to address the two research objectives concerning, respectively, the entrepreneurs' conception of marketing, in relation to that proposed in literature, and the psychological determinants of their intention to adopt a marketing approach (i.e., what they mean by that). A broad sample of 225 Italian SME entrepreneurs, located in the Provinces of Lecce and Rome, Southern Italy, was used. Their firms were homogeneously stratified according to five different industrial sectors (Construction, Engineering, Food, TCF, and Wholesale), number of employees (1-20, 21-50, and more than 50 employees), and level of sales (0-250 thousands Euro, 250-500 thousands Euro, 500 thousands to 2.5 millions Euro, 2.5-5 millions Euro, 5-7.5 millions Euro, and finally more than 7.5 millions Euro). Also here, due to the lack of cooperation of 37 entrepreneurs, the main sample was reduced to 188 firms (see Table 2, for descriptive statistics of the main sample).

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics of the Main Sample (N = 188)*

Industrial sector	%	Number of employees	%	Sales (×1,000 Euro)	%
Constructions	21.3	1-20 employees	38.8	< 250	9.0
Engineering	20.2	21-50 employees	32.4	250-500	10.6
Food	21.3	> 50 employees	28.8	500-2,500	18.1
TCF	18.1			2,500-5,000	12.2
Wholesale	19.1			5-7,500	6.0
				> 7,500	21.8
				No answer	22.3
Total	100	Total	100	Total	100

The main questionnaire was developed on the basis of the preliminary findings obtained from the pilot study and administered, by personal interviews, in a close-ended format, to the 188 SME entrepreneurs at their firm locations. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first one, six questions on the perception of the marketing concept were asked to participants in order to investigate: (1) the subjective meanings attributed by entrepreneurs to the marketing concept; (2) the main function performed by marketing in their organizations; (3) the importance of marketing for their organizations, in relation to other functions; (4) whether a marketing approach has ever been adopted; (5) (if adopted) how long it is since this approach has been adopted; and (6) the motives of its adoption. In the second part of the questionnaire, a total of 52 questions, on a 7-point unipolar scale, were used to measure the entrepreneurs' behavioral intention and its determinants, according to the TPB (Ajzen 1991). In particular, 20 items were used to measure the entrepreneurs' attitude towards

the adoption of a marketing approach: 10 of which concerned the subjective probability that this adoption behavior can provide the advantages (or disadvantages) most frequently mentioned in the pilot study; whereas the remaining 10 items concerned the subjective evaluation of each of these advantages (or disadvantages). 10 items were used to measure subjective norm: 5 of which concerned the subjective probability of the approval (or disapproval) of the adoption of a marketing approach by the entrepreneurs' relevant others most frequently mentioned in the pilot study; whereas the remaining 5 items concerned the relative evaluation of their motivation to comply with those referents. 20 items were used to measure perceived behavioral control: 10 of which concerned the subjective probability of the occurrence of the events that, according to the pilot study, could mostly facilitate (or hinder) the entrepreneurs' adoption of a marketing approach; whereas the remaining 10 items concerned the subjective evaluation of the importance of such events in influencing the adoption behavior in question. Finally, two items were used to measure directly the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach, one of which concerned the strength of this behavioral intention; while the other one, the subjective probability of engaging in this adoption behavior in the next three years. In the last section of the questionnaire, socio-demographics questions (on their industrial sector, number of employees, level of sales) were asked to participant.

4. Results

4.1. Entrepreneurs' Conception of Marketing

The first research objective was to investigate the marketing concept shared by Italian SME entrepreneurs, in comparison to that developed in the academic literature by means of different paradigms (i.e., the *transactional*, *relationship*, and *inductional marketing* approaches). To this end, descriptive statistics were calculated on the entrepreneurs' answers to the first six questions concerning their perception of the marketing concept.

In line with preliminary findings obtained from the pilot study, results of the main questionnaire, synthesized in Table 3 (*below*), showed that more than 75% of SME entrepreneurs share a marketing concept that is different from and narrower than that developed in literature.

Table 3: *Italian SME Entrepreneurs' Conception of Marketing*

Question	Answers (Valid %)
1. In your opinion, what is marketing?	1) A tactics to develop sales and firm size (44.7); 2) A tool to improve consumers' knowledge of the firm and its products in the marketplace (18.6); 3) A function involving all firm processes and resources (15.4); 4) A tactics to satisfy niche customers (12.8); 5) A tool to search for new markets (8.5) [Total = 100] (N = 188)
2. Which is the main function performed by marketing in your organization?	1) Increasing sales (26.6); 2) Satisfying customers (16.5); 3) Communicating (15.4); 4) Developing brand equity (13.8); 5) Developing new products (9.6); 6) Analysing new markets (9); 7) A marginal function or none (5.3); 8) Facing competition (3.7) [Total = 100] (N = 188)
3. In comparison to other functional areas, what is the importance of marketing to your organization?	1) As other functions (35.6); 2) Instrumental to Production (31.9); 3) Predominant (20.7); Marginal (11.9) [Total = 100] (N = 135, 53 missing answers)
4. Have you ever adopted a marketing approach in your organization?	1) Yes (71.8); 2) No (28.2) [Total = 100] (N = 188)
5. If yes, how many years ago did you adopt it?	1) Less than 2 years ago (34.8); 2) 3-5 years ago (23); 3) 6-9 years ago (15.6); 4) 9 years ago or more (26.6) [Total = 100] (N = 135, 53 missing answers)
6. Which are the motives of the adoption of a marketing approach in your organization?	1) The improvement of consumers' knowledge of the firm and its products in the marketplace (39.3); 2) Firm's development (36.3); 3) The improvement of firm's competitiveness (20.7); 4) The analysis of business opportunities (3.7) [Total = 100] (N = 135, 53 missing answers)

More precisely, many entrepreneurs were found to consider marketing as a mere tactics to develop sales and firm size (44.7% of cases), to improve consumers' knowledge of the firm and its products in the marketplace (18.6%), to satisfy niche customers (12.8%), or as a tool to search for new markets (8.5%). Only 15.4% of respondents, by defining marketing as "A function involving all firm processes and resources", showed a broader view of this construct. As for the main function performed by marketing in the organization, SME entrepreneurs declared that marketing plays different alternative roles in their organizations: increasing sales (26.6% of cases); satisfying customers (16.5%); communicating (15.4%); developing brand equity (13.8%), or new products (9.6%); analysing new markets (9%); facing competition (3.7%). In comparison to other organizational functions, more than one

third (35.6%) of SME entrepreneurs were found to consider marketing as important as other functional areas, while 31.9% of respondents were found to consider it as instrumental to production, and 11.9%, as marginal. Only 20.7% of entrepreneurs were found to consider marketing as the predominant function within their organizations. The vast majority of entrepreneurs (i.e., 71.8%) declared that they have already adopted a marketing approach (i.e., what they consider as a “marketing approach”) in their organizations and, among these: more than one third (i.e., 34.8%), for 2 years or less; 23%, for 3-5 years; 15.6%, for 6-9 years; and 26.6%, for nine years or more. As for the motives of the adoption of a marketing approach, entrepreneurs indicated the possibility of either improving consumers’ knowledge of the firm and its products in the marketplace (39.3%), favoring the firm’s development (36.3%), or improving its competitiveness (20.7%).

In order to verify whether some differences in the entrepreneurs’ conception of marketing exist across different industrial sectors, classes of employees, and/or levels of sales, the same analysis was carried out also on disaggregated data. In general, no substantial difference was found, with some exceptions. First of all, compared to smaller firms, medium-sized firm entrepreneurs (i.e., firms with more than 50 employees and a level of sales higher than 7.5 millions Euro) showed a conception of marketing more similar to that proposed by academic researchers. In fact, results showed that, for a relative majority of these entrepreneurs (22.2% of those with more than 50 employees and 24.4% of those with a level of sales higher than 7.5 millions Euro, respectively), the main function of marketing is considered that of satisfying customers, rather than selling. Moreover, according to the same kind of entrepreneurs (41.3% of those with more than 50 employees and 40% of those with a level of sales higher than 7.5 millions Euro, respectively), the main motive of the adoption of a marketing approach concerns the possibility of the development of the whole organization, thus showing that these entrepreneurs are more prone than others to adopt a long-term perspective when implementing a marketing programme. Secondly, entrepreneurs belonging to the TCF industry, compared to those of other industrial sectors, seem to possess a concept of marketing more similar to that proposed by academic researchers. Results showed that, for most of these entrepreneurs (i.e., 45.5%), marketing is prevalent over the other organizational functions and the key motive of the adoption of a marketing approach concerns the possibility of the development of the whole organization.

4.2. Cognitive Determinants of the Intention to Adopt a Marketing Approach

The second research objective was to identify, by means of the TPB (Ajzen 1991), the cognitive determinants of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach in their organizations. To this end, Ajzen's (1991) model was implemented by a multiple linear regression analysis, wherein the *intention to adopt a marketing approach* was treated as a dependent variable, whereas *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control* as independent variables.

Before carrying out the regression analysis, *behavioral*, *normative*, and *control beliefs* were calculated in order to obtain, through their weighted sum, *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control*, respectively. Table 4 (below) shows the means and standard deviations of salient beliefs behind the three Ajzen's (1991) determinants of intention, in order to identify those that mostly impact on their measurement. Results showed that some perceived advantages associated with the adoption of a marketing approach, namely "The possibility of promoting both firm's and products' images" ($M = 31.99$ and $SD = 13.34$) and "Improvements in firm's production and sales" ($M = 30.31$ and $SD = 12.96$), more than other perceived advantages or disadvantages tend to impact on the entrepreneurs' attitude towards the adoption of a marketing approach. As for subjective norm, "Top management" ($M = 32.45$ and $SD = 15.01$) and "Customers" ($M = 31.35$ and $SD = 15.47$) more than other social referents are capable of influencing entrepreneurs' intention. Finally, compared to events hindering the adoption of a marketing approach, those that could facilitate such a behavior, namely the occurrence of "A market growth" ($M = 26.85$ and $SD = 12.62$) and "An increase in disposable financial resources" ($M = 25.83$ and $SD = 12.76$), seems to exert a higher influence on the entrepreneurs' sense of control over the behavior in question.

All the *behavioral*, *normative*, and *control beliefs* were added up in order to obtain aggregate measures of *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control*, respectively. Thus, before testing Ajzen's (1991) model statistically, multi-collinearity diagnostics was performed in order to verify whether these theoretical determinants of the behavioral intention (i.e., *attitude*, *subjective norm*, and *perceived behavioral control*) were strongly correlated. Results showed the existence of a marginal collinearity among these independent variables (r s ranged from .4 to .5 and VIF indices from 1.41 to 1.70), so that regression analysis was considered appropriate (cf. Barbaranelli 2003). Results of the multiple linear regression analysis showed that the TPB is capable of explaining the entrepreneurs'

intention to adopt a marketing approach ($R^2 = .420$; $Adj. R^2 = .410$) (see Table 5, below). *Subjective norm* ($\beta = .534$, $p < .001$) was found to be the only significant determinant of the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach, while *attitude* and *perceived behavioral control* were found to have no significant ($p > .05$) impact on the behavioral intention.

Table 4: Behavioral, Normative, and Control Beliefs of Italian SME Entrepreneurs (N = 188)

Behavioral Beliefs	M	SD
1. Possibility of promoting both firm's and products' images	31.99	13.34
2. Improvements in firm's production and sales	30.31	12.96
3. Need for employing highly skilled human resources*	28.93	13.22
4. Possibility of a better understanding of existing markets	28.07	14.31
5. Possibility of developing new markets	25.73	14.01
6. Further difficulties in rising funds*	21.56	13.92
7. Possibility of a better understanding of competitors	21.29	13.96
8. Cost efficiency (i.e., the possibility of rationalizing costs)	19.55	13.38
9. Risk of making mistakes*	16.05	11.72
10. Wastes of time and other resources*	15.77	11.82
Normative Beliefs		
1. Top management	32.45	15.01
2. Customers	31.35	15.47
3. Financiers	28.11	15.29
4. Employees	26.14	14.61
5. Competitors	8.02	10.43
Control Beliefs		
1. A market growth	26.85	12.62
2. An increase in disposable financial resources	25.83	12.76
3. Development of the marketing knowledge within the organization	24.74	13.71
4. The necessity to modify firm's existing strategies**	22.62	11.34
5. Subsidies and/or interventions by banks and/or the Government	19.92	13.81
6. A markets' crisis**	13.63	10.54
7. Difficulties in employing marketing experts**	13.23	10.50
8. An enhancement of tax pressure**	11.97	9.89
9. Unexpected difficulties in rising funds**	11.92	9.62
10. Organizational inertia**	10.34	8.72

Note: Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) were estimated on the expectancy-value products. * = Perceived disadvantages deriving from the adoption of a marketing approach; ** = Event hindering the adoption of a marketing approach.

Table 5: *Determinants of the Entrepreneurs' Intention to Adopt a Marketing Approach*

Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	-.670	2.812	-	-.238	.812
ATT	.019	.013	.109	1.489	.138
SN	.151	.019	.534	7.998	.000
PBC	.021	.014	.097	1.427	.155

Note: $N = 188$. Dependent Variable = Intention to adopt a marketing approach. $R = .648$; $R^2 = .420$; $Adj. R^2 = .410$; Standard-error of estimation = 11.202; $F(3, 187) = 44.394$, $p < .001$. ATT = Attitude; SN = Subjective Norm; PBC = Perceived Behavioral Control.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present research sought to investigate the marketing concept possessed by Italian SME entrepreneurs comparatively to that developed in the academic literature and proposed by the three paradigms (i.e., the *transactional*, *relationship*, and *inductional marketing*), and to analyse the psychological factors capable of influencing the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach, by applying Ajzen's (1991) model, since it has been shown to be appropriate also to explain and predict organizational behaviors (e.g., Elliott and Jobber 1995). Results obtained from a two-phase survey, carried out on a broad sample of Italian SME entrepreneurs, enabled us to achieve the two research objectives.

As for the first objective, concerning the entrepreneurs' conception of marketing in relation to that proposed by academic researchers, results showed that, although the vast majority of Italian SME entrepreneurs adopt some form of marketing, their conception is primitive and, in general, too limited with respect to the paradigms proposed by academic researchers (i.e., the *transactional*, *relationship*, and *inductional marketing*). Although none of the three marketing paradigms developed in literature can be considered superior to the others in absolute terms, because their appropriateness varies across contexts (e.g., Fruchter and Sigué 2005), Italian SME entrepreneurs have an incomplete understanding of the marketing concept with respect to each of such paradigms, since they tend to consider it as a synonym of either selling ("A tactics for developing sales and firm size"), or advertising ("A tool for improving consumers' knowledge of the firm and its products in the marketplace"), thus overemphasizing short-term goals (i.e., sales increases) instead of long-term profitability. By considering marketing as a mere tactics in support of selling or advertising, rather than as a strategic planning tool, as postulated in the *relationship marketing* paradigm, or even as a

strategic orientation, as postulated in the *inductional marketing* paradigm, Italian SME entrepreneurs show a “myopia” in marketing planning (Levitt 1960). Yet, even though further research on this issue is necessary, there is reason to believe that this sort of “myopia” could be generalized to all SMEs, since recent studies carried out on SMEs located in other countries (e.g., Murdoch, Blackey and Blythe 2001) have obtained similar results.

Albeit a small portion (20% or less) of Italian SME entrepreneurs – by considering marketing as the predominant function in the organization involving all processes and resources – were found to be relatively marketing-oriented when facing competition, the vast majority of them seem to adopt a production- or a sales-orientation. Since these orientations (i.e., production- and sales-orientation) can be considered predominant in Italian SMEs, the adoption of a marketing approach by more than half (i.e., 57.8%) of SMEs entrepreneurs, during the last five years or less, may be considered as an innovative organizational behavior insofar as their conception of marketing fits that proposed by academic researchers. In this respect, consistently with other research works (e.g., Becherer, Halstead and Haynes 2003; Liu 1995), analyses conducted at a disaggregate level showed that, compared to smaller firm entrepreneurs, those belonging to medium-sized firms (i.e., firms with more than 50 employees and those with a level of sales higher than 7.5 millions Euro) seem to possess a more sophisticated conception of marketing, more similar to that proposed in the marketing literature. This may be explained by considering that as firm size increases, the traditional barriers to the development of a marketing orientation – such as an incomplete understanding of marketing concept itself, the inherent conflict between short-term and long-term goals, limited resources, a lack of specialist expertise, and so on (cf. Carson 1985; Webster 1998) – decreases. Also firms belonging to the TCF industry were found to be more marketing-oriented than others. In this case, a possible explanation resides in the fact that SMEs belonging to this industry, which represent a traditional and important manufacturing sector of Italian economy, more than other firms have suffered market crises, due to the increasing competition on international markets, so they have had the necessity to reformulate their long-term strategies, in order to reach a sustainable competitive advantage of differentiation and survive the intensified competition. Most probably, in this scenario, entrepreneurs operating in this industry have had to adopt a marketing orientation, even with the support of other skilled managers and/or external consultants.

As for the second research objective, concerning the psychological factors influencing the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach, our results confirmed the validity of the TPB (Ajzen 1991) in explaining organizational behaviors, in general, and this adoption behavior, in particular. *Attitude* and *perceived behavioral control* were shown to exert no significant influence on the entrepreneurs' intention to adopt a marketing approach. In terms of both behavioral and control beliefs, which are the constituents of these theoretical determinants of the behavioral intention, this means that the adoption of a marketing approach does not depend on either the perceived advantages of the behavior in question (i.e., "The possibility of promoting both firm's and products' image" and "Improvements in firm's production and sales") or external factors, such as the occurrence of specific events facilitating such a behavior (i.e., "A market growth" and "An increase in disposable financial resources"). Rather, the adoption of a marketing approach by SME entrepreneurs seems to rely on internal organizational factors; as *subjective norm* was found to be the sole significant determinant of the entrepreneurs' intention to engage in such a behavior. According to some authors (Elliott and Jobber 1995), who applied the TPB to investigate the firms' tendency to commission marketing research, within organizational contexts, *subjective norm* may be interpreted as an indicator of the *corporate* (or *organizational*) *culture*, that is, the pattern of shared values and beliefs about organizational functioning that provides members with the behavioral norms in their organization (cf. Deshpandé and Webster 1989). In terms of normative beliefs, which are at the basis of this determinant of the behavioral intention, the main social pressures on the adoption of a marketing approach come from the "Top management", which, especially within smaller firms, consists of the entrepreneur himself/herself and, rarely, of some other manager and/or consultant. These subjects act as *culture carriers* (Leppard and McDonald 1991), that is, key-organizational figures that, through their behaviors, communicate organizational values and, thus, contribute to the development of corporate culture. Hence, in order to encourage the adoption of a marketing approach in Italian SMEs, it seems crucial to influence values shared by these key-subjects and their beliefs, in order to develop an open culture – such as a *competitive culture*, emphasizing competitive advantage and market superiority, or an *entrepreneurial culture*, emphasizing innovation and risk taking (Deshpandé and Farley 2004) – capable of both broadening the conception of marketing possessed by entrepreneurs and their collaborators and encouraging a stronger marketing orientation.

In order to do that, a crucial role may be played by marketing academics. Their task is to persuade SME entrepreneurs, whose marketing decisions usually are simplistic and haphazard because of a lack of marketing background, to deepen their marketing knowledge and increase the ability to use it in their organizations. More specifically, whenever SME entrepreneurs are reluctant to improve their knowledge in this field, marketing researchers can adopt an *inductional* approach to the diffusion of marketing knowledge and principles among local firms (i.e., what we call “the marketing of marketing”). In line with this approach, marketing researchers should try to manipulate entrepreneurs’ expectancies and modify their perception of marketing. For example, they could help entrepreneurs understand what the adoption of a marketing approach really implies in terms of advantages (e.g., a better understanding of customer needs) and disadvantages (e.g., a higher risk related to a continuing product innovation) and encourage them to attend MBA courses, marketing training programmes, which should be perceived by entrepreneurs as useful for managing their business successfully. To do that, these courses or training programmes should be designed on SME peculiar characteristics (e.g., organizational flexibility, specialization, and limited resources), and marketing educators should use specific methods of teaching (e.g., case-study) capable of making marketing principles more intelligible by, and then more useful for, their entrepreneurial attendance.

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