Barbara Aquilani

Siena University, Faculty of Letter and Philosophy, Senior Lecturer, Via Roma n. 56, 53100 Siena, tel: 329/0941945, e-mail: aquilani@unisi.it

Tindara Abbate[1]

Messina University, Faculty of Economics, Phd, Via dei Verdi, 98122 Messina, tel: 349/6967137, e-mail: tindara.abbate@unime.it

---

[1] This paper is the shared work of Barbara Aquilani who wrote § 1, § 3, § 5 and § 6.1, and Tindara Abbate, who wrote § 2, § 4 , § 6.2 and § 7.

'Experience' on the web: a benchmark between firm samples

Publication summary

The aim of the paper is to understand if there are differences on web sites and then identify them among firms who communicate customer experience on line and the ones that do not directly communicate the experiential marketing use on line. To look at the different communication strategies used on line, two different firm samples have been selected and compared examining issues like the type of experience communicated on line, information and participation tools used, accessibility and navigability features, etc. Results show how the firm sample which communicates the experiential marketing strategy and instruments on line uses more participation tools, paying attention to both accessibility and navigability and seems to use the web site as part of its overall experiential marketing and communication strategy. However, further investment appears necessary to make the customer communication in this media really effective. The 'control' sample seems to pay more attention to the information function of the web site and seems not to use it to establish a relationship with its customers, based on the experiential marketing strategy.

1. Introduction

Experiential marketing is becoming a more and more interesting approach to marketing studies and application nowadays, as some firm success cases show (eg. Acquario di Genova, Europcar, Feltrinelli, Illy, Prada, Siemens). It is based on the consideration that to built, but overall maintain and support, a reciprocal and effective relationship with customers which is so important to firm success, it's important to involve them in some memorable and unforgettable experiences. These can be proposed in each of the steps of the acquiring decision process and also after sales, to have suggestions and/or feedback necessary to better satisfy clients' needs and desires so build customer loyalty. This 'links' the customer, in a stable way, to the firm, its brands and its products/services. Much research has been done over recent years on this subject, with theoretical and empirical works from authors all over the word (see § 2). In this paper,

however, we focus our attention only on one aspect of the approach which seems not to have been sufficiently investigated: the communication on line of the experience and how it affects the way firms create, organize and manage their internet communication. This because the communication of experience is an important factor to successfully implement and support an experiential marketing approach, especially using internet, considering the even more important role this communication media is acquiring in the search and selection of information by potential and effective customers (see § 3).

So the aim of the paper is to establish the existence of differences in communication on line among firms, which can be found from an internet user through some keyword linked to experiential marketing approach and a 'control' sample of firms, extracted from the 500 Fortune firm list of the year 2007, all belonging to manufacturing sectors. To carry out this survey the sole perspective used in the paper is that of the web surfer looking for information on the internet, without considering the firm perspective in building and managing its communication on line issues. Factors considered range from the type of experience on line to instruments made available by firms on their web space to stimulate customer participation in firm life and activity and try to build a reciprocal and stable relationship with them, based on experience and trust. Thanks to this study we wish to better understand the application of experiential marketing features in on line communication by different firm samples and then to discover the reasons for the differences we expect to find in the two selected samples.

To do so, after a brief review of the literature on the experiential marketing issues and its benefits (see § 2) and on the communication on line features and importance of present day communication mix (see § 3), we formulate the research hypothesis to be validated (see § 4). Then we describe the methodology used in selecting and comparing the samples (see § 5) and we illustrate the results and discuss them (see § 6). We then conclude examining some managerial implications, some limitations of the study and also how this same topic can be further explored (see § 7).

2. The experiential marketing approach: a review of the literature

In recent years the experience concept has become more and more interesting for researchers in customer studies and creates a specific approach to marketing called *experiential marketing*. The multi-dimensional and complex nature of this concept has required the support of other scientific disciplines (psychology, sociology, anthropology and

ethnology), leading to a proliferation of literature on the subject and to some different perspectives, depending on socio-cultural and time frame differences.

Some authors have conceived the consumption experience as an activity focussed on imagination, enjoyment and pleasurable sensations (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) in which the individual expresses his own identity and personality (Mooradian and Olver, 1994) and distinctive characteristics which consciously or subconsciously limit and/or reinforce the consumption experience commitment. This experiential view approach attributes relevance to the composite nature of the consumption process, to the symbolic, aesthetic and hedonistic consumption variables bringing together the rational/functional components with the emotional/hedonistic ones. This new approach to the consumption experience differentiates from the traditional one which views it as a mere act of destruction (Firat and Dholakia, 1998), based on a purely utilitarian functional and rational logic. Following this new perspective, the consumption process is connected to complex cognitive, emotional and affective processes which activate during the interaction between the individual and the offering system (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat and Shultz, 1997). Specifically this interaction must be able to generate a high level of consumer involvement and to evaluate the interaction experienced (Addis, 2007). The more the level of interaction increases the more the link created between the individual and the offering system becomes so intense that the individual becomes immersed in the consumption experience (Carù and Cova, 2006). This creates some interesting effects on the customer value perception.

Other authors have dedicated their work to the design of customer experiences adopting the approach used by cultural and artistic firms, in order to make the consumption experience spectacular. In this way the firm manages to transform the consumer into spectator or actor (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). With the creation and management of the experience as a personal and memorable event (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), firms attract and involve the consumer and this represents, not only the most advanced form of value creation, but above all the true competitive scene from which firms cannot withdraw (Smith and Wheeler, 2002). In this context new principles, rules and managerial techniques are defined to identify the offer, stimulating the senses, imagination and passion. Also new ways through which firms can excite emotions are created thanks to instruments such as products, environment, sales channels, packaging, communication, brand, web site and new media (Schmitt, 1999; Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Berry, Carbone and Haeckel, 2002; Brown, 2003; Haeckel, Carbone and Berry, 2003; LaSalle and Britton, 2003). According to the Schmitt model (1999), these tools

permit the design and realization of the holistic experience, based on a harmonious combination of *sense*, *feel*, *think*, *act*, *relate* type of experience. So, in this different scenario, the firm must make investment decisions in order to: a) realize a wide experiential system which includes differentiated and complementary goods and/or services capable of increasing the customer needs; b) reorganize all physical and virtual forms and also means of client interaction (personal and technology), allowing him a choice of elements with which to build his personal experience, based on his desires, preferences and personality. In doing so the experiential marketing investments become effective for two different reasons. The first, is that consumer participation and involvement increases making the client more positive towards the product, the brand and the firm, influencing his preferences. The second is that the differences perceived between brands is accentuated. In this case the experimential marketing approach can have a decisive role in supporting differentiation strategies which make the offer difficult for competitors to imitate.

In this scenario new technologies, and internet especially, can have an exceptional and relevant role being interactive and invisible (Norman, 1998) creating personal consumption experiences. This allows the traditional sector firms to: a) improve their goods and services in different ways: b) integrate and enrich the information necessary to affect purchase and consumption choices; c) supply new formats of entertainment based communication; d) facilitate and stimulate the involvement, participation and sharing of experience, ideas, suggestions, obtaining immediate feedback; e) constantly present new discussion subjects and new interaction formats to attract their target. Just think of special sites planned and created by multinational companies, similar to virtual theme parks, where it is possible to watch videos, exchange information and suggestions, listen to music, participate in competitions, games and forums, in order to make the visit enjoyable and to collect information about needs, desires and consumer preferences. These new technologies which make the creation of multimedia, interactive and personal relationships with the customer possible can be considered as premises for the growth, development and consolidation of collaborative relations based on experimental and co-evolving processes. These relationships contribute to the generation and accumulation of firm value, creating a collaborative stable and faithful customer base, generating positive outcomes not only in cash flow but above all for potential value which stable customer relationships can generate (Costabile, 2001).

3. The role of internet as a strategic communication media

Nowadays internet represents more and more a strategic communication tool for firms which wish to be more visible in their market and manage their communication with customers in an integrated way (Kent and Taylor, 1998). In fact, the web represents not only an information tool, but also a very particular strategic media to built and support bilateral collaborative relationships with customers and amongst them, thanks to some special characteristics. Among these: a) the continuous access and availability of data and information in the way and at the time desired by the web surfer; b) the possibility of immediately transferring this information and data; c) the interactivity of this media, the only one that allows the creation and maintenance of reciprocal relationships between people all over the world, which can also support the 'word of mouth' mechanism, so important to firm success (e.g. chat, forum); d) the communication individuality which the web allows unlike other media, which permits the selection of desired information but also people to get in touch with. This allows, on the one hand, the combination of special advantages of other mass-media, like for example television, with the 'personalization' of relationships with some selected people. On the other hand, gives the possibility to design and obtain the desired product from the firm which, in this way, can better satisfy the expressed needs of its customers. Some examples of the benefits above are represented by Dell and Mattel for Barbie: they allow their web site visitors to choose each component of the computer or the doll they desire and deliver it all over the world, making the experience on line unforgettable and memorable because the customer directly participates in product design which the firm will then realize just for him; e) the integration of communications and transactions, made possible thanks to ever more advanced technologies and tools and to ever safer software for money transfer (Bauer, Grether and Leach, 2002). These internet characteristics allow the activation of new 'dialogue forms' between firms and customers, giving the firms new opportunities to answer different web surfer requests more rapidly and precisely and, in this way, create stable relations based on trust (Bauer, Grether and Leach, 2002; Castell, 2006; Kent, Taylor and White, 2003; Walther, Gay and Hancock, 2005), which is the final goal of the consumer experience firms propose and renew over time.

To fully evaluate the role of internet in the firm communication mix it also seems important to point out the role of the web in today's media scenario. In fact, it must be remembered that the use of this new media has been rapidly growing over the last year (+ 78%) compared to what happens for all other media, newspapers and magazines less read and television which is growing less rapidly compared to the increase in 2007 (Livraghi, 2008a).

Livraghi (2008b) in his last survey affirms that the number of people who, more or less frequently, use internet in Italy ranges between 15 and 19 million. In June 2008 Italians using internet occasionally were 18.9 million (17.9 million from home or work computers), with an average connection estimated at 5 times a week, but the use of internet is becoming a stable habit and fewer people use it occasionally (Livraghi, 2008b). The ISTAT institute in 2008 did a survey on information and communication technologies which clarified that Italian families between 2006 and 2007 left the slower connections and chose the more rapid ones: the short range passed from 18.7% to 14.7% of the interviewed sample and the use of the wide one clearly increased (+ 8.2%). This data shows internet connection use has increased decidedly for Italian families and people choose the more rapid and effective systems readily available nowadays (the total data passed from 33.1% in 2006 to 37.3% in 2007) (Istat, 2008). A trend compatible with that of the number of connections and also with motivations and use of the internet by web surfers today. In fact, the same survey (Istat, 2008) points out that most people use internet to send and receive e-mail (77.3%), but 64.8% of the sample connect to find information about products and services and to learn something of personal interest (54.7%). The number of people who use internet to play, download toys, images and music is rapidly growing (it passed from the 32.3% in 2006 to the 39.9% into 2007), like the use of radio and television on line, which increased from 14.8% to 21.4% in just 12 months. Read together this data suggests people use internet not only as an integrative information tool among others, like newspaper and television, but more and more as the only media to refer to when looking for information, experience, shopping, etc. or to contact a firm. This is true overall when the web site visit results in a memorable and unforgettable experience, when firms manage to retain the web surfer on their web space to establish or maintain a reciprocal relationship. But this is only possible if the web site contains a great deal of information and overall participation tools which allow the web surfer to have a special experience immediately on line, without any delay. Remembering and exchanging with the firm and with other customers, the customer activates the 'word of mouth' mechanism and gives the firm the feedback it needs to better respond to the clients' needs and desires. In fact, internet with its special characteristics appears to be the best media to create and maintain a good and strong relationship with potential and effective customers because of the interactivity, personalization and multimedia function it allows, where the firm also realizes an unforgettable experience on line to be remembered and immediately exchanged.

For the above reasons we have conducted a survey which compares the characteristics of two different firm samples trying to understand if these companies are sufficiently aware of

the great opportunity internet offers, not only for communicating the experience lived on or off line, but also for creating and maintaining stable and reciprocal relationships with potential and effective customers based on trust.

4. Hypothesis

The consumption experience today has become a dominant theme in which firms are investing heavily. The benefits derived from effective investments in consumption experience in new differentiation offering system areas (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2003) and subsequent competitive advantages are numerous (see § 2). The cases of companies like Acquario di Genova, Europcar, Feltrinelli, Prada and Siemens, who have developed strong emotional, hedonistic and aesthetic potential of their goods and services, in order to provide the consumer with a rich and valued experience, are significant. Through customer experience the company introduces a change in the way of interaction with his target, design and realization of the offering system, focussing on the emotional involvement, collaboration and participation of the consumer. To achieve this, firms can use all available tools ranging from the most traditional to the most advanced. However it's true that firms, even though aware of the advantages of new technologies and internet, achieve their goals progressively. So today not all firms use the most advanced instruments available and the direct experience on line is not so easy to find. In fact, a contemporary survey showed as most on line selected firms, thanks to a keyword research on the web (see § 5), communicate on line the experience to follow through, when the customer wants, off line. For the 'control' sample, given the methodology used to do the selection which excluded the firms found through keywords related to the experiential marketing approach, one can hypothesis that few or no firms communicate the experience on line, completed on or off line.

Hypothesis 1. Firms in the 'experience' sample communicate on line above all the experience carried out off line.

To communicate the experience on line, but also to make the web site visit interesting and unforgettable, software provides a lot of tools which can be divided into information and participation instruments. The first ones are used to give information to web surfers about the firm, the events it organizes, its activities, etc., but they don't allow any kind of exchange of data or information. The second ones are instruments which allow the exchange of information and opinions between the firm and web surfers visiting its web site (eg. blog, web 2.0 platform), but also between customers who meet each other on the firm web site (eg.

forum, chat). The 'experience' sample is expected to have a large number of both information and participation tools compared with the 'control' sample, because of its explicit will to communicate the experience on line and, in particular, to prefer the participation instruments to the information ones. This is connected to the fact that firms who want to communicate the experience have a great opportunity to do so on line, thanks to the large number of participation tools which allows the exchange of data, information, experiences and feedback, possible only on the web and so exploit all the benefits internet, with its interactivity and multimedia, allow. This expectation is not so straight forward as it could at first seem. This is because in the choice each firm makes in the number and type of participation and information tools, the role of the relationship between costs and benefits is also important. In fact even if it's true that costs related to new technologies decrease constantly over time it's also true that benefits related to these new technologies (alone or in combination) are not well known. Above all this is true regarding the real effectiveness they have in reaching the customer, changing his relationship with the firm and effectively involving him in the proposed experience. So even if the 'experience' sample is expected to have more participation tools than information ones, for the reasons above, we don't expect to have a great number of them in each of the analysed web sites because of the unfamiliar relationship between the benefits and cost of these instruments.

In contrast the 'control' sample, selected looking at the Fortune 500 best firms of 2007, is expected to use a large number of information tools because big companies normally consider the web site a necessary investment to supply information to customers, but they do not explicitly communicate any experience on line and so the number of participation tools is expected to be lower than the one in the 'experience' sample.

Hypothesis 2. In firm web sites of the 'experience' sample, information tools are less used than participation ones in comparison with the 'control' sample.

The interaction and participation of individuals is especially significant in the digital world which has widened firms' options, because various technical characteristics can influence perceived and consumption behaviour. These spaces, if well designed and developed can facilitate the complete immersion of the consumer in the navigation experience, creating surprising situations of a high level of emotional and hedonistic involvement, able to influence his perceptions. Environments so created put together with a series of on line services allow new forms of experimentation which help to define the entire offering system and innovation processes. This permits a greater empowerment to the

individual whose capacities and abilities need to be taken into account by the management when deciding on the experience proposed. Based on these considerations it is possible to hypothesize that in the case of the 'experience' sample, services directly available on line are more numerous compared with those in the 'control' sample. In fact, we expect the latter to use the web only for information and not interaction.

Hypothesis 3. In firms of the 'experience' sample there is a greater number of services on line compared with the 'control' sample.

The web site is certainly the most widespread complex virtual communication context. The heterogeneity and dynamism of recent forms underlines a clear evolutionary tendency for the site from a 'static window' in digital form (Pastore e Vernuccio, 2006), representing the firm and its offering system, to an important interaction space with the customer using the one-to-one relation logic (Peppers e Rogers, 2001). However as the site must be easily usable by any client it is necessary that it be easily accessible and navigable. In other words, accessibility means making the site more easily usable by anybody without taking into consideration their ability or lack of ability. In fact, when a site has been correctly designed, developed and edited, all users have the same chance of acquiring the information present and accessing all available functions. Navigability permits easy navigation within the site and the acquisition of information in a short space of time (research engines, site maps, rationality of the hyper-textual structure, etc.). Accessibility and navigability of the site are very important so the user can experience the moment of web surfing in an enjoyable, emotional and pleasurable way and above all find the required information quickly, without having to carry out further research leaving the site to satisfy his knowledge and enjoyment needs. For this reason, firm web sites in the 'experience' sample are expected to have these two characteristics. However, also in the 'control' sample, considering the role of the firms included and the methodology used for the selection of the sample, these characteristics are expected to be present.

Hypothesis 4. In firm web site of the 'experience' sample accessibility and navigability features are just as important as for the 'control' sample.

To test the above hypothesis we selected the two analysed samples to be benchmarked in different ways and then conducted our survey following the methodology illustrated below.

5. Methodology

To understand if firms which explicitly communicate the experience on line build and manage their web site communication features differently from other firms which don't communicate it clearly on line, we define two different samples.

The 'experience' one was selected considering the typical way a web surfer searches for information. He normally types some keywords in the search line of an internet engine he has already selected. We imitate this way of searching for information, looking at the four most important search engines in Italy: Yahoo.com, Google.com, Virgilio.it and Msn.com. and typing the following words: *marketing esperienziale, experiential marketing, shopping experience, concept store*, *esperienza, experience*. We consider 5 pages of results (50 records) for each keyword in each internet engine analysing 1,200 web sites. A SEMS survey (2007) states that Italian internet users rarely go beyond the second page, so 5 pages can be considered a good sample to analyse. It is important to point out that not all of the 1,200 records we have found are included in the analysis, we exclude all records that don't open, are still in a building phase or do not concern the subject studied (experiential marketing). We create an excel form to load all findings, using the first column to indicate the name of the firm corresponding to the found web site and other columns (one for each of the 4 search engines considered) to count how many times a firm web site appears. We then sum all times a firm web site appears in all search engines and sort them into a decreasing order to extract the ones that appear at least twice. In this selection we only consider manufacturing firms and the resulting sample was of 17 firms, with a frequency ranging from 5 to 2. It's interesting to notice that just one firm appears in all of the four search engines analysed, 2 in 3 of them, 8 in 2 and 6 just in one, but always more than once. This first step of the survey was conducted between the 1st of May and the 15th of June 2008.

To select the 'control' sample we consider the manufacturing firms in the 500 Fortune firm list of the year 2007. We eliminate the ones that appear in the research done to select the 'experience' sample (even if they appear once), then we select the first 17 firms as they come.

After selecting the two samples to benchmark, we visit each firm web site and analyse them thanks to a form we have already prepared divided into various sections (Aquilani and Lovari, 2008). The first one considered the communication on line of the experience on or off line and the type of experience eventually proposed looking only at the one explicitly cited in the web site. The second one concerned information tools like 'event announcement', 'history' of the firm, 'institutional video', 'FAQ', 'link' to other web sites, 'web TV' to see on line, 'podcast', 'e-magazine', etc, and participation tools, in particular 'social networking',

'forum', 'chat', 'downloadable material', 'web 2.0 platform'. The third one took into account the presence on the analysed web sites of on line services such as 'service list', 'intranet', 'on line payments' and 'reserved area' to check if they are used in the two sample firm internet sites. The fourth and last one was dedicated to accessibility and navigability tools available on the analysed web sites as 'information on privacy', 'different browsers', 'disabled people' dedicated space, to look at the accessibility issue and presence of 'menu', 'back to homepage' in each page, 'search' function, availability of the 'map' of the web site and 'help' section to evaluate navigability ease.

All data collected was progressively loaded in two different excel sheets to maintain the two samples separate, but making them comparable thanks to the use of the same loading grid and labels. We then use the same software to process the information.

All results obtained thanks to the above methodology are used to test the hypothesis we formulate (see § 4) and are presented and discussed in the following section.

6. Results

In this section we illustrate the results of the survey and discuss them to validate the hypothesis formulated above.

6.1. Experience communication on line, information and participation tools

The first hypothesis concerns the experience communicated on line. As shown in table 1, the 'experience' sample communicates on line the experience carried out off line 11 times and in 6 cases permits the experience directly on line. The most explicitly communicated experience is the 'entertainment' one, for 6 firms carried out off line and for 4 firms carried out directly on line. Surprisingly 2 firms, found through the experiential marketing keywords used for the research, didn't communicate any type of experience on their web site. Just one firm communicated on line three different types of experiences directly on the firm web site.

Table 1. Type of experience communicated on line – 'experience' sample

Type of experience	Entertainment	Entertainment +Emotional	Entertainment +Visual	Emotional	None	Heard+Visual+Emotional	Total
Off	6	1		2	2		11
On	4		1			1	6
Total	**10**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**2**	**1**	**17**

From the table above it is clear that most firms of the 'experience' sample communicate on line the experience carried out off line (11 times against 6 times) like events to attend, products to try visiting a shop, etc. A different situation from the one emerging from the 'control' sample (see table 2) for which it is clear that 14 firms don't communicate on line the experience carried out on or off line at all and just three provide music which can be heard visiting their web site.

Table 2. Type of experience communicated on line – 'control' sample

Type of experience	None	Heard	Total
Off	14		14
On		3	3
Total	14	3	17

Looking at these results it seems clear that the 'experience' sample needs to make further investment in the experience communication on line to exploit all the possible benefits the web allows (see § 3). But it is also true that the 'control' sample too seems unaware of web potential to help build relationships with customers, because only 3 firms use just one of the tools internet provides to make navigation more fascinating and to keep the web surfer on the firm web site longer. This results in a waste of time and resources if we think that customers are increasingly looking at internet as a primary information tool (see § 3) and retaining a customer on the firm web site can be the first step to building a relationship with him (Carù and Cova, 2006) and also to acquire more information about the surfer's specific desires and aspirations, in order to better satisfy him ahead of competitors.

From the above considerations it seems that *Hypothesis 1* can be fully *validated*, because the experience communicated on line by the selected sample is mostly that experienced off line. Then firms in the 'control' sample show little use of experience communication on the web. Further more, the 'control' sample, doesn't seem to use the web to attract a larger number of internet users or make visiting their web site more interesting and spend time on it, using the experiential marketing strategy, nor even use this media at the top of its potential to forge customer relationships and loyalty.

Looking more closely at tools used to communicate on line, table 3 shows the number of information and participation tools found in the 'experience' sample and table 4 shows the same results for the 'control' sample. It seems clear that fewer firms grouped in the 'experience' sample use a large number of information tools compared to the ones of the 'control' sample. But an inverse situation emerges looking at the number of participation tools used by firms in both samples.

Table 3. Number of information and participation tools – 'experience' sample

Number of participation tools	Number of information tools									
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**Total**
0		1								1
1	1	1	1			2				5
2					1		2	1		4
3							1	1		2
4				1				2	1	4
5							1			1
Total	**1**	**2**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**4**	**4**	**1**	**17**

Table 4. Number of information and participation tools – 'control' sample

Number of participation tools	Number of information tools						
	2	**4**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**Total**
0		1	1	2	2	1	7
1			1	1	3	1	6
2				1	1	1	3
3	1						1
Total	**1**	**1**	**2**	**4**	**6**	**3**	**17**

These results are not surprising if we consider that firms grouped in the 'experience' sample communicate the experience on line. To do so, they need a large number of participation tools to make the experience enjoyable on line or to tempt the web surfer to enjoy the proposed experience off line, visiting a shop or participating in an event. The firms

in the 'control' sample are big companies which are not so interested in communicating the experience on line and prefer to invest in providing information to customers and web surfers more generally, using other marketing strategies and tools.

Better focussing the analysis we can look at tables 5 and 6 which illustrate the different tools respectively used by the 'experience' sample and the 'control' one. Looking at them it clearly appears that firms in the 'experience' sample have more technologically advanced information tools in their web site (e.g. web tv, e-magazine, podcast) compared with the ones found in the 'control' sample, even if in the latter the information tool average shown by each firm is 7.2, so higher than the one found for the 'experience' sample (5.2). Table 6 also shows that in the 'control' sample 'contacts' is the most used information tool (all firms have them), an indication of the will firms have to help surfers contact them, if necessary. We can also add that, for this sample, generally all tools regarding information about the company (e.g. firm information and data, history, agenda, etc.) are widely used. Less attention seems to be dedicated to the information tools analysed by the 'experience' sample that considers putting an 'event announcement' panel on the home page quite important, like the web TV when it is enjoyable on line, even if the institutional video appears 7 times (5 in the 'control' sample) and the section FAQ is available in 6 web sites (1 firm has it in the 'control' sample).

.

**Table 5. Type of information tools –
'experience' sample**

Information tools	Firm number
Event announcements	14
Press communications	12
Contacts	12
History	10
Agenda	9
Firm information and data	9
Institutional video	7
FAQ	6
Link	5
Web TV	3
E-magazine	1
Podcast	1

**Table 6. Type of information tools –
'control' sample**

Information tools	Number of firms
Contacts (telephone numbers, etc.)	17
Press communications	16
Event announcements	15
Firm information and data	15
History	14
Agenda	13
Newsletter	8
Rss feed	7
Institutional video	5
Link	5
Press release	2
Intranet	1
FAQ	1

From the data above it seems that in the 'experience' sample less attention is paid to the information tools investigated in this survey, except for the most technologically advanced

ones, compared with the 'control' sample. An inverse situation seems true for the participation tools we look at in this study. In fact, looking at tables 7 and 8 it is immediately clear that participation tools are widely used by firms in the 'experience' sample (11 of them have a download section, just one has a unique participation tool; 11 have the web 2.0 platform, 4 times as the sole participation tool; 4 make chat available to their visitors), instead of what appears for the 'control' sample (1 web site has free download material, 2 have a web 2.0 platform and just one allows the use of chat to web surfers on its web site). On average firms in the 'experience' sample have 2 participation tools in each of their web sites, and firms in the 'control' sample have just one, with 7 firms which have none. Only the 'social networking' participation tool is quite familiar in the 'control' sample compared with the 'experience' one (respectively in 8 and 6 firm web sites).

Table 7. Type of participation tools – 'experience' sample

Participation tools	Number of firms
Downloadable material	11
Web 2.0 platform	11
Social networking	6
Chat	4
Forum	2
Manager contact	1
Publication of questions and answers	1

Table 8. Type of participation tools – 'control' sample

Participation tools	Number of firms
Social networking	8
Forum	2
Web 2.0 platform	2
Chat	1
Forum with firm managers	1
Downloadable material	1
Blog	1

The above data seems to suggest that firms grouped in the 'experience' sample have a more open approach with a greater degree of openness to their customers and more in general to web surfers entering their web site, trying to capture their attention and encouraging them in get in touch with the firm and/or other web surfers they meet on the company web space. So *hypothesis 2*, which suggests that participation tools are preferred by firms in the 'experience' sample, instead of information tools chosen by firms in the 'control' sample, can be easily *validated*. This same consideration can also be read, for the 'experience' sample, as a consequence of the will to communicate the experience on line, but also to tempt web surfers to remain on the web site as long as possible to have an experience directly on line, making full immersion in the proposed experience possible (Carù and Cova, 2006). In fact, this can really help the firm to rapidly and fully satisfy them ahead of competitors, but can also help gain support from web surfers, its brand and its product image. This can also help to build a positive opinion of the company, creating a differentiated perception of the firm

offering system from that of its competitors. In this way, the company creates a stable relationship with clients and enhances customer loyalty which is so important for firm success and performance.

Looking further at tables 3 and 7 it's important to point out than even if the participation tool number is, as expected, higher in the 'experience' sample than in the 'control' sample, these instruments don't seem to be widely used by firms. In fact, in only 4 web sites of the 'experience' sample we found the presence of 4 participation tools and in just one, the use of 5 of them. This seems to show, quite clearly, a still reduced confidence in the effectiveness of these instruments, not enough research has been done to justify serious investment in these tools to communicate the experience on line.

6.2 On line services, accessibility and navigability

After examining the various instruments available on firm sites of the two samples compared, it seems necessary to focus the analysis on services on line. Data in table 9 shows the range of services available to the consumer on line and leads to various considerations. Also given the great relevance of on line service for customer care, only 7 firms of the 'experience' sample seem to have directly invested in the design and development of all 3 investigated services. 2 different web site firms offer 2 services, 5 firms offer only one. The remaining 3 have no services available and so cannot have immediate feedback from web surfers or establish relationships with them to improve their offering system. But the most important thing is the diverse type of services available to the web surfer. As shown in table 10 a greater relevance is attributed to the 'service list' because it facilitates the exploration offered. Also 'intranet' is present in a certain number of web sites as 'on line payment', a function that if well designed and managed can be a valid alternative to face-to-face payment, guaranteeing transaction security carried out on line. 'Reserved area' has less relevance and appears in only 1 case.

Table 9. Number of on line services – 'experience' sample

Number of on line services	Total
0	3
1	5
2	2
3	7
Total	**17**

Table 10. Type of on line services – 'experience' sample

Type of on line services	Number of firms
Service list	12
Intranet	10
On line payments	7
Reserved area	1

Carefully examining the relative data of the 'control' sample it becomes immediately evident that most firms, in fact 11, have developed no on line services. Only 5 firms, as shown in table 11, have provided their site with 1 on line service and only 1 firm offers all on line services analysed. Looking at the type of services available, as in the case of the 'experience' sample, 'service list' and 'intranet' seem to be the most offered services. In summary, these results show the *validity of the third hypothesis*. As, the 'control' sample provide fewer on line services because firms in that category consider and use the web site as an information instrument and not as an interactive one.

Table 11.Number of on line services – 'control' sample

Number of on line services	Total
0	11
1	5
3	1
Totale complessivo	**17**

Table 12. Type of on line services – 'control' sample

Type of on line services	Number of firms
Service list	4
Intranet	3
On line payments	1

Moving on to the analysis of site accessibility and navigability, shown in the following tables, it is possible to see how in the 'experience' sample (see table 13) and in the 'control' sample (see table 15) both characteristics have been considered relevant. This in order to make the navigation experience simple, personal and pleasurable to the consumer/web surfer.

The choice of certain instruments for accessibility and navigability are able to transfer facts not only to services offered but, above all, to the relationship which develops during navigation. Not surprisingly great relevance is attributed to 'privacy information' which in 41% (7) of cases in the 'experience' sample (see table 14) and 94% (16) of 'control' sample is the only instrument used. This can be considered of major interest to the user/consumer which encourages the image of trust and protection of the firm.

The 'privacy information' is not normally present in combination with other instruments, such as 'other browser' and 'disabled people' facilitating tools. In fact, in only 1 firm web site of the 'control' sample we can find all three instruments investigated ('privacy information', 'other browser' and access for the disabled).

Table 13. Accessibility and navigability of the web sites – 'experience' sample

Number of accessibility tools	Number of navigability tools		
	2	5	Total
0	3	1	4
1	4	8	12
3		1	1
Total	**7**	**10**	**17**

Table 14. Type of accessibility tools – 'experience' sample

Accessibility tools	Number of firms
Privacy information	8
Different browsers	6
Disabled people	1

Table 15. Accessibility and navigability of the web sites – 'control' sample

Number of accessibility tools	Number of navigability tools		
	4	5	Total
1	3	13	16
3		1	1
Total	**3**	**14**	**17**

Also for navigability there are not substantial differences between the two samples analysed. In particular, it seems evident that 58% (10) of the 'experience' sample (see table 13) and in fact 82% (14) of the 'control' sample (see table 15) give all 5 types of instruments investigated. 'Menu', 'link' to other web sites and 'back to home' functions seem well represented compared with 'help' function which is less used in both samples. In the light of these considerations the *fourth hypothesis is fully validated.*

7. Conclusions

In conclusion it is possible to draw a first image of the use of internet communication experience, but also on how firms belonging to the two samples analyse, create and manage their web sites for communication and the building of customer trust. Most of the 'experience' sample firms, notwithstanding their activity sector, even though using the web site as an information tool, don't make the experience directly available on line and refer back to an off line experience. In fact, these firms, although they have fully functioning and advanced technology tools and instruments, are not so interested in realizing a complete on line experience, different from an off line one. The analysed web sites appear to be, rather, a way to be present within a media which is growing exponentially and impossible to ignore. However, a number of firms seem unready to invest at least as much as would be necessary to be really effective. Competences and resources required to fully exploit the interactive and multimedia opportunities, possible thanks to the use of virtual and meta-sensorial instruments, are still too expensive and the benefits are not so easily recognized and evaluated. The use of participative instruments able to insure a high level of interactivity and of services supporting web surfing, which hold the interest of the navigator, are also well suited for firms in the 'control' sample. In fact, these tools maintain trust in the brand, firm and its product and

services. This mass means of communication with its special and inimitable characteristics offers opportunities which were difficult to image only a few years ago. However, many firms still don't take advantage of them and also don't fully include this media in their marketing and communication strategies. Regarding this prudent behaviour it is important to consider resources necessary not only at the moment of creation but also for updating and maintaining the web site to be improved using the most avant-garde technologies.

These results are obviously the fruit of specific methodology choices which are also the reason for some research limitations. The first, is that concerning the choice of firms in the 'experience' sample, which has been selected thanks to some keywords related to experimential marketing which could be considered too limiting. The same limitation can be found in search engine choices, done considering previous studies, before the publication of this paper and which therefore could be considered outdated. In addition, this analysis was conducted by two researchers over three months during which time the 50 results in each search engine for the selected keywords have not been re-examined since. This is a common problem for web site research given the ease of inserting, cancelling information, indexing and positioning each web site, making this media difficult to monitor precisely.

The conclusions drawn and also the limits defined encourage future exploration of this topic. It would be particularly interesting to analyse a wider 'experience' sample which included all manufacturing companies (even those which appear only once, see § 5), and also all the distribution and services companies found during the survey, but not included in the sample being too numerous for the time available. The same sample could be improved in quality using a greater number of keywords connected to the experiential marketing approach. Also the 'control' sample could be selected using a different methodology. Besides in the preparation of the form for the survey one could include other information and participation tools, on line services and techniques to improve accessibility and navigability to be examined, which would lead to a more in depth study.

References

ABBATE T., 2008, "Progettare l'esperienza con il cliente. Una prospettiva per il marketing esperienziale", Samperi Editore, Messina.

AQUILANI B. AND LOVARI A., 2008, "The "new season" of university communication between institutionalization processes and strategic targets relationships: an empirical analysis of internet web sites of Italian universitites", Euprera 2008 Congress, Milan 16-18 October.

ADDIS M., 2005, "Ad uso e consumo. Il marketing esperienziale per il manager", Pearson Prentice Hall, Milano.

BAUER H., GRETHER M. AND LEACH M., 2002, "Building Customer Relations Over the Internet", Industrial Marketing Management, n. 31, pp. 155-163.

BERRY L. L., CARBONE L. P. AND HAECKEL S. H., 2002, "Managing the total customer experience", *Mit Slow Management Review*, vol. 43, n. 3, Spring, pp. 85-89.

BROWN S. W., 2003, "The employee experience", *Marketing Management*, March/April, pp. 12-13.

BROWN S. W., 2003, "The leadership experience", *Marketing Management*, May/June, pp. 12-13.

CARÙ A. AND COVA B., 2005, "L'immersione del consumatore in un contesto esperienziale: la narrazione introspettiva come modalità di ricerca", Paper presented at the 5th International Congress Italy–France, EAP, Venice, 20-21 January.

COSTABILE M., 2001, "Il capitale relazionale", McGraw-Hill, Milano.

CASTELL M., 2006, "Galassia Internet", Feltrinelli, Bologna.

FIRAT A.F. AND DHOLAKIA N.,1998, "Consuming People. From Political Economy to Theaters of Consumption", Routledge, London.

FIRAT F. A., CLIFFORD J. AND SHULTZ L., 1997, "From segmentation to fragmentation. Markets and marketing strategy in the post modern era", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 31, n. 3/4, pp. 183-207.

FIRAT F. A., DHOLAKIA N. AND VENKATESH A., 1995, "Marketing in a postmodern world", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 29, n. 1, pp. 40-56.

FIRAT F. A. AND VENKATESH A., 1993, "Postmodernity: the age of marketing", *Internal Journal of Research in Marketing*, n. 10, pp. 227-249.

HAECKEL S. H., CARBONE L. P. AND BERRY L. L., 2003, "How to lead the customer experience", *Marketing Management*, January/February, pp. 18-23.

HIRSCHMAN E.C. AND HOLBROOK M.B., 1982, "Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and propositions", *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 46 Summer, pp. 92-101.

HOLBROOK M.B. AND HIRSCHMAN E.C., 1982, "The experiential aspects of consumption: consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun", *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 9, September, pp. 132-140.

ISTAT 2008, "Le tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione: disponibilità nelle famiglie e utilizzo degli individui. Anno 2007", 16th January, available on the web at the address www.istat.it.

KENT M.L. AND TAYLOR, M., 1998 "Building a Dialogic Relationship Through the World Wide Web", *Public Relations Review*, n. 24, 3, pp. 321-334.

KENT M. L., TAYLOR M. AND WHITE W., 2003, "The Relationship Between Web Site Design and Organizational Responsiveness to Stakeholders", *Public Relations Review*, n. 29, pp. 63-77.

LIVRAGHI G. (a cura di), 2008a, Dati sull'internet in Italia, disponibile all'indirizzo http://www.mclink.it/personal/MC8216/dati/dati3.htm (data at the 15th February of 2008).

LIVRAGHI, G. (a cura di), 2008b, Dati sull'internet in Italia, disponibile all'indirizzo http://www.mclink.it/personal/MC8216/dati/dati3.htm (data at the 9th June of 2008).

MOORADIAN T.A. AND OLVER J.M., 1994, "Neurotism, Affect and Postpurchase Processes", *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 21, pp. 595-600.

NORMAN D., 1998, "The Invisible Computer", Mit Press Cambridge; trad. it. "La gestione strategica dei servizi", Etas Libri, Milano 1996.

PASTORE A. AND VERNUCCIO M., 2006, "Impresa e Comunicazione", Apogeo, Milano.

PEPPERS D. AND ROGERS M., 2001, "Enterprise One to One. Tools for Competing in the Interactive Age", Random House, New York, Impresa one-to-one. Il marketing relazionale nell'era della Rete, Apogeo, Milano.

PINE II B.J. AND Gilmore J.H., 1999, "The Experience Economy. Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage", Harvard Business School Press, Boston; trad. it. L'economia delle esperienze. Oltre il servizio, Etas, Milano, 2000.

PRAHALAD C.K. AND VENKATRAM RAMASWAMY, "The new frontier of experience innovation", Mit Sloan Management Review, vol. 44, n. 4, Summer, pp. 12-18. RESCINITI R., 2004, "Il marketing orientato all'esperienza", Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli.

SCHMITT B.H., 1999, "Experiential Marketing", Free Press, New York.

SEMS (2007) "Motori di ricerca ormai fondamentali nei processi di decisione e di acquisto degli italiani online", May, available on line at the web address www.sems.it.

SMITH S. AND WHEELER J., 2003, "Managing the customer experience. Turning customer into advocates", Financial Times Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River.

WALTHER J. B., GAY G., & HANCOCK J.T., (2005), "How Do Communication and Technology Researchers Study the Internet?", Journal of Communication, n.1, pag. 632-657.