

Valentina Della Corte  
University Federico II of Naples  
Via Cinthia - Monte Sant'Angelo, 26  
80126 - Napoli/Italy  
valentina.dellacorte@unina.it  
081-675370

Giovanna Del Gaudio  
University Federico II of Naples  
giovanna.delgaudio@unina.it  
081-675068

Iris Savastano  
University Federico II of Naples  
iris.savastano@gmail.com  
081-675068

Alessandra Iavazzi  
University Federico II of Naples  
alessandra.iavazzi@unina.it  
081-675068

# **EXPLORING NEW MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES: CROWDSOURCING AND ITS ROLE IN STRATEGIC AND MARKETING CHOICES**

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the role of marketing strategies in a perspective of stronger customers involvements highlighting its evolution according to both theoretical and empirical contents. Starting from the assumption that customers are not merely targets of strategic activities, the paper underlines the active role of customer in design and implementation of marketing policies both at induced and organic level. This statement comes from the higher consumer confidence in the use of web 2.0 tools and their value-added services. Particularly, the current research analyzes how firm's relations with other can create value through crowdsourcing activities. In particular, considering the specific tourism context, the research aims at exploring to what extent the crowdsourcing initiatives influence the marketing activities both at induced and organic level. The research uses the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) according the user innovation approach and the Resource-Based Theory (RBT). In order to empirically investigate the crowdsourcing activities, this paper employs a case study analysis exploring the reason why Turismo Emilia Romagna chooses to apply to the crowd; how it involves the community and what are the firm's resources and competences in developing crowd-sourcing activities.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Crowdsourcing, marketing, RBT, SDL, user innovation, destination marketing.*

## **INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES**

The present research explores how a rather causal web phenomenon can generate interesting opportunities for proactive and innovative firms in their marketing activities, focusing on the role of crowdsourcing in strategic and marketing choices.

Howe (2006) defines crowdsourcing as “*the process by which the power of the many can be leveraged to accomplish feats were once the province of a specialized few*” and later (2008) as “*the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an*

*employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call) ”.*

The challenge of the paper is to deeply analyze the topic, which is at its very early stage, in order to develop a theory on it parallelly to its process in the real world.

The term crowdsourcing derives from the combination of two words crowd and sourcing, referring to a new way of doing marketing activities on the web. Crowdsourcing is therefore a network of people that share knowledge and collaborate through web. Firms that draw from collective intelligence open an online contest, a sort of competition between freelancer working on the lab for a specific project, product launch, etc. These competitors however can even decide do cooperate between them. Now firms are looking for intellectual capital and professionalism on the web: through knowledge sharing, it is possible to carry out important marketing strategies.

This research issue is based on two simple assumptions: customers are not merely targets of strategic activities but play an active role in design and implementation of marketing policies both at induced and organic level and second, firms are moving from the classical outsourcing activities, therefore external consulting, to crowdsourcing initiatives in order to find a solution for difficult to solve problems, asking opinions and ideas to an online community.

Hence, the paper explores the customer involvement as well as other stakeholders in the crowdsourcing initiatives, the ways through which these activities are integrated by the firm and the practical implications arising from this process of co-creation solution.

In order to achieve these objectives, the paper has been constructed in order to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Why do the companies choose to apply to the communities?
- 2) How do they involve the customer?
- 3) What are the firm’s resources and competences in developing crowdsourcing activities?

In order to answer these questions, a complex theoretical framework is adopted, combining Service Dominant Logic (SDL - Vargo and Lush, 2004, 2006, 2008a, 2008b) with Resource-based Theory (RBT- Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1991) and taking into account some principles of the user innovation theory (von Hippel, 1998; 2005). The basic idea is that new marketing approaches can favour a networking process where the consumer is totally involved, helping adding new strategic resources to the firm and to leverage the already existing ones in a new way. This changes also marketing approach and strategies development.

Therefore literature connected to the issue is selected and analyzed in order to give a theoretical explanation to a very new and innovative issue, also trying to get to interesting conclusions and hints both for research and for practitioners.

As regards the theoretical background, the paper proposes the following route:

- (1) literature on Service Dominant Logic – in a user innovation approach – and Resource-based Theory;
- (2) literature specifically related to crowdsourcing.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis is based on the case study method, focusing on the customer-centric perspective of Turismo Emilia Romagna and underlines that the co-creation process can lead to innovative solutions, impacting on marketing strategies not only in terms of product but also in cost savings. The case study analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994, 2004) allows to deeply understand which are the implications of the customer role in the crowd-sourcing initiatives. Finally, the outcomes of the present research are synthetically explained.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

In today's volatile and hyper-competitive environment (D'Aveni, 1994), firms must quickly adjust and respond at these evolving market conditions. The increased pressures on firms, due to continuous and rapid technological changes, dynamic processes of globalization and higher variability in demand's complexity (D'Aveni, 1994; Drejer, 2002), make difficult to manage these fast growing market dynamics.

Firms are rethinking their way to do business to face these challenges, especially focusing on the changes of value creation process.

In this context, the value creation process of the firm shifts from a top-down vision where the CEO and the top management are considered sources of value creation, to a networked and collaborative approach where all the actors are involved in the value co-creation process. Indeed, the traditional approach to value creation was characterized by a goods-dominant logic (GDL), that recalls Smith's focus on productive activities. According to Smith (1976), these activities create tangible goods that contribute to national welfare (Vargo, 2011; Vargo and Morgan, 2005). In this view, GDL can be considered outcome-oriented (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010) since the value creation is the result of a top-down process (enacted by the provider), where goods and services are sold through the exchange of money. While in the past, the

provider was the only actor able to integrate firm's resources, nowadays "all economic and social actors are resource integrators" (Vargo and Lusch 2006, 2008b).

This latter perspective encompasses the Service Dominant Logic (SDL) of the firm (Vargo and Lush, 2004; 2008a; 2008b), according to which customers, employees and other actors are *resource integrators*.

As regard the definition of "service" according to the SDL, it could be argued that it is not the intangible good but it is "the process of using one's competences (knowledge and skills) for the benefit of another party" (Vargo, 2009).

The *relational view* (RV) is empathized by SDL since the firm creates value with the customer (beneficiary) through an interactive process from which the value emerges (Grönroos, 2008) and is co-created. The implementation of this process and the achievement of its aims are the result of the customer's contribution in terms of personal skills, knowledge and information (Hunt and Derozier, 2004), brought within the firm-customer interaction.

The co-creation of relationships' experiences (Della Corte *et al.*, 2009) is a key assumption in SDL since it underlines and marks the transition from the concept of "market to" (GDL) to "market with" (SDL-Vargo and Lush, 2004). The theoretical support underpinning the "market with" philosophy must be traced into the concept of operant resource. In the SDL light, the customer can be considered an operant resource (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Nicholls, 2010; 2011), a set of knowledge, experience and skills, involved in the process of value co-creation. This relational approach, within the value creation process, leads to the creation of mutual value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2007).

Another key concept for the comprehension of how value propositions are co-created is *value-in-use* (Grönroos, 2008; Payne *et al.*, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008a, b), empathized under SDL. Indeed, value may occur over time only when the firm offerings are really experienced and benefited by the customer (Vargo and Lusch, 2006) since "value actualization is performed by users in an idiosyncratic and contextual way" (Gumesson and Polese, 2009).

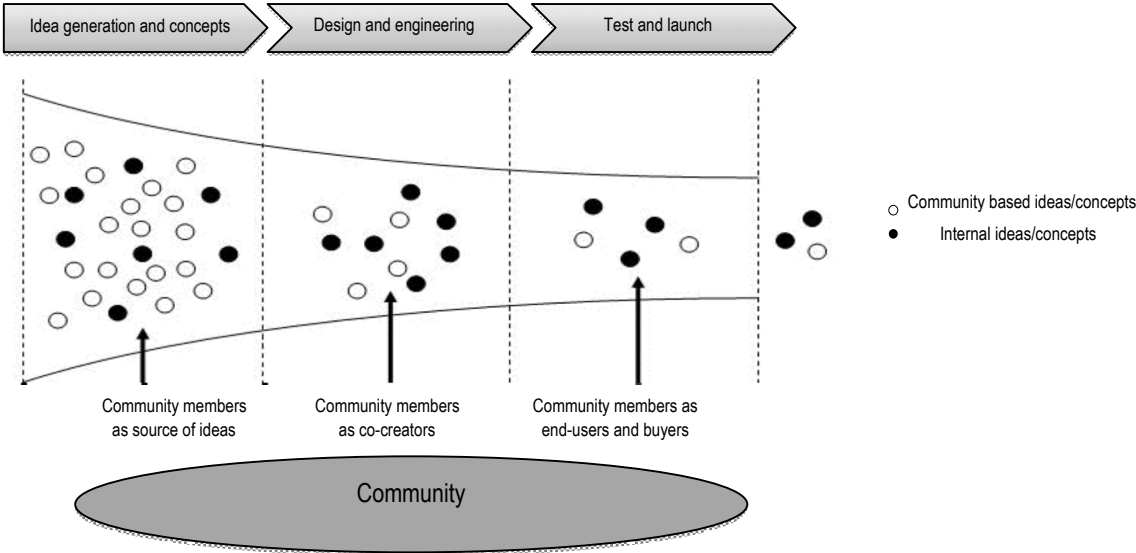
The concept of value-in-use recognizes the user as primary actor during the process of value creation related to value-in-use, whereas the payer represents a key subject during value-in-exchange and, finally, the buyer can cover each of the underlined roles (Michel *et al.*, 2008).

Hence, the importance of communities and their role is clear referring to the Vargo and Lush's ten foundational premises (2008), in which the role of communities as operant resources is underlined as source of competitive advantage. Operant resources are not only knowledge and skills provided by customers but the overall knowledge and skills provided by

individuals. Since all actors have a key role in developing new competences, we also refer to the ninth premise, which states that “all social and economic actors are resource integrators”. For the purpose of this paper, it is also important to underline the role of the network in value creation, because the value concerns not only the dyadic relation “supplier-consumer” but also involves a series of different stakeholders and activities (Gummesson, 2007). The supplier-consumer relational horizon, highlighted by the SDL, must be enlarged in the light of the complex environment in which these actors interact. According to this many-to-many perspective, the social and economic actors are the networks’ nodes and the relationships among those (Gummesson, 2007) encourage and stimulate the value co-creation in a networked approach.

The overall skills and competences provided by individuals – or users, in a more general view – are shaped and mixed together in order to create innovation. In this way, SDL has to be linked to the user innovation approach, according to which users are firms or individual consumers that expect to benefit from using a product or a service (von Hippel, 2005). In particular, they have a key role in new product development process because of the ideas potentially generable within a community (Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: The role of communities in New Product Development process.**



**Source:** Pitta and Fowler, 2005.

A community is characterized by common interests and mutual engagement in the activities they do together (Wenger, 1998). In particular, the concept of mutual engagement can be

linked to the mutual value emphasized by SDL as the co-creation and co-sharing of innovation. Communities share common resources, in terms of routines, experiences, vocabulary, tendencies and styles, etc., that members have developed over time (Wenger, 1998b) and are often based around problem solving goals (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

It is important to underline that user innovation approach is just linked with SDL since it does not take into account the role of users' resources and competences for the generation of competitive advantage. Hence, with respect to the specific resources and competences able to create, develop or strengthen the innovative factors of a service, this approach does not provide answers in terms of exploration and exploitation of these resources and competences. For these reasons, SDL needs to be enriched by the resource-based perspective (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1991) for two main reasons. First, the service providers must integrate the co-creation activities, through the development and the exploitation of internal resources and competences, in order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, the interactions between service provider and customer require, from the supplier side, absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002) in order to understand customer's needs and acquire information in the process of value co-creation to after translate them in value offerings.

This vision offers solid ground to the concept of "market with", emphasized under SDL, and recalls the relational view contents. Indeed, the roots of relational view must be traced within the RBT since the relational view represents a research stream generated by the resource-based approach (Acedo *et al.*, 2006). Although the relational view, developed within the RBT, contemplates a wider vision that regards a set of relationship among different firm's stakeholder, the SDL stresses its attention on the relational exchanges between customer and supplier, giving a specific light to this research issue. Besides, the RBT helps in understanding what are the firm's strategic competences, knowledge and resources to develop a mix of services that meets customer requirements.

Second, sharing the perspective of resource-based theory, the competitive advantage of the firm is based on customer's ability in co-creating value offerings and on the possibility that the customer can become itself a strategic resource.

Therefore, the paper proposes an overlapping perspective between the SDL ) according the user innovation approach and RBT and describes new ways of involving customer in co-creation activities.

In this direction, the crowdsourcing encompasses these two perspectives. The crowdsourcing is a "new web-based business model" (Brabham, 2008) that involves a network of individuals

for the co-creation of innovative solutions. This new marketing model can be connected to the concept of many-to-many marketing (Gumesson, 2004, 2007) since the interaction occurs when the customer networks actively interact and participate in support of value solutions (Gumesson, 2004).

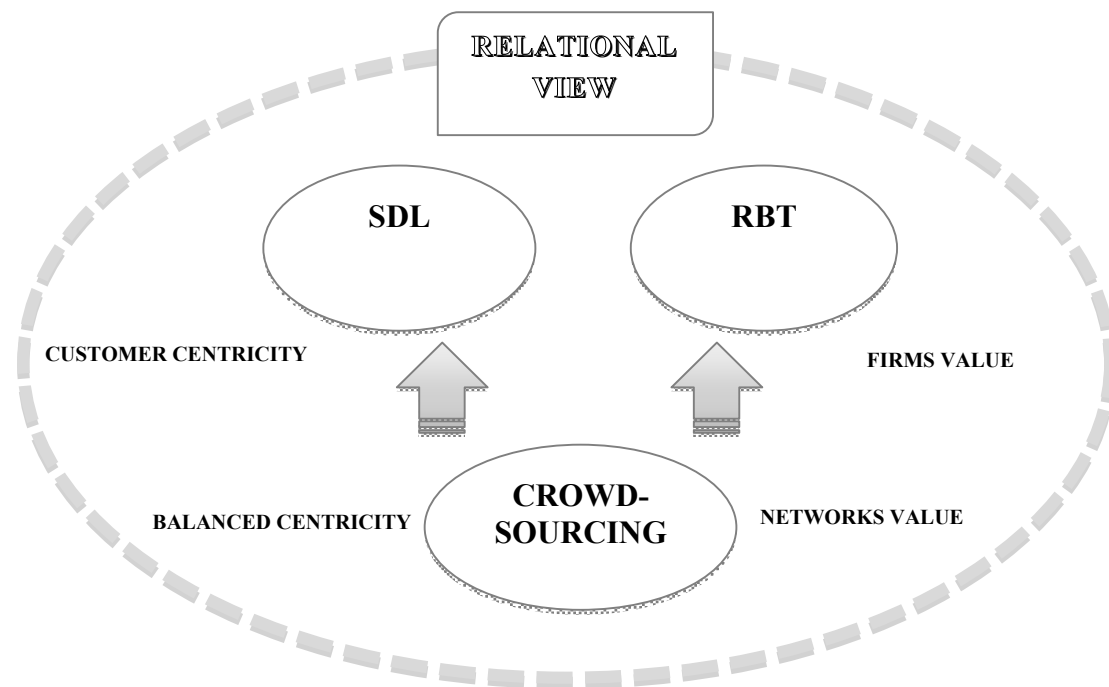
If crowd means “a large number of people gathered together in a disorganized or unruly way” (Oxford Dictionary, 2012), consequently the crowdsourcing uses this subjects (networks of economic and social actors) as an operant resource able to shape innovative solutions that after influence the firm’s marketing activities.

Hence, the many-to-many marketing theory fits well with the crowdsourcing concept for two main reasons:

- 1) *Value is created by the network*: the relations established within the network do not only concern the “supplier-consumer” dyad but also involve a series of different stakeholders and activities (Gumesson, 2007). The supplier-consumer relational horizon, highlighted by the SDL, must be enlarged in the light of the complex environment in which these actors interact. According to this many-to-many perspective, the social and economic actors are the networks’ nodes and the relationships among those (Gumesson, 2007) encourage and stimulate the value co-creation in a networked approach.
- 2) *Value should be created according to a balanced centrality*: the concept of crowdsourcing does not only direct to the consumer for the co-creation of innovative offerings but to the whole network of economic and social actors. This perspective underlines the transition from customer-centricity to a balanced centrality of the interests. The necessity of balance the network interests is linked to a simple assumption: customer satisfaction is not the only driver of success (Gumesson, 2007). In this direction, the network satisfaction is a key driver according to a long-run vision. In RBT vision, however, the balanced centrality does not just mean that the process tries to find an adequate equilibrium for each of the involved actors. On the contrary, it tries to create benefits, both more tangible and intangible, for the involved actors that are partners according to the networking vision.



**Fig. 2: The theoretical framework**



**Source:** our elaboration.

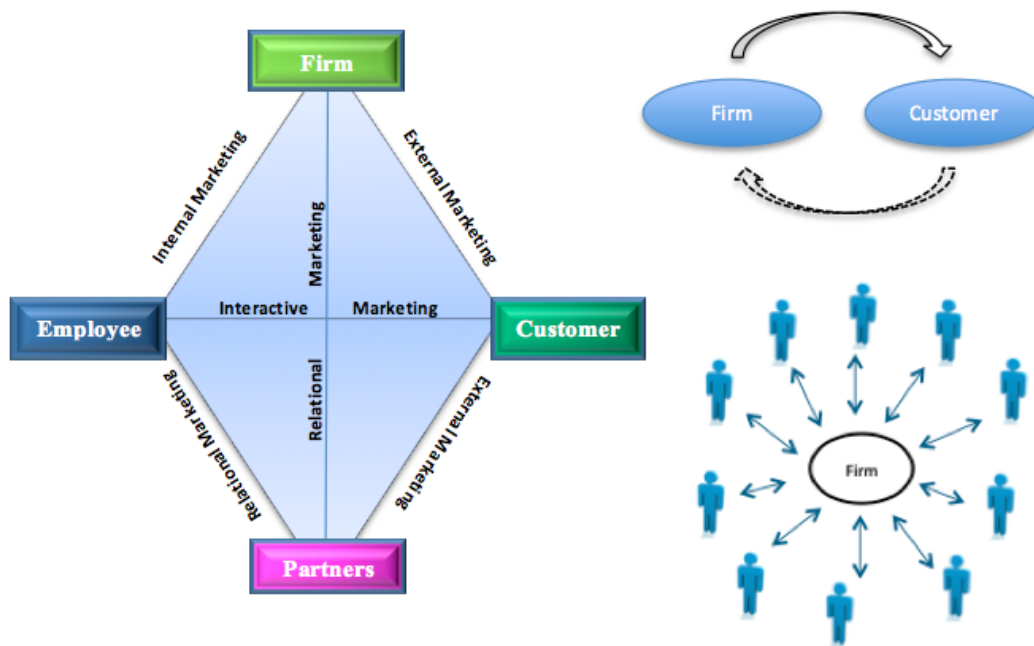
Such aspects have to be examined in a marketing framework which is now by far more complex, involving different types of relationships, different actors, in a set of relations where the customer plays a relevant role.

Looking at figure 3, marketing process regards not only the now dyadic relationship between the firm and its consumers (that, as underlined, play an active role according to SDL logic), but also relationships between its personal and its clients (with a relevant role of personal relations management) and in some cases between its suppliers and its customers, as well as its partners with both its personnel and its customers.

In the figure, in fact, it is important to distinguish between (Della Corte, 2009):

- 1) *external marketing*, referred to the relationship between the firm and its customers as well as between the firm's partners and its partners,
- 2) *internal marketing*, between the firm and its employees and, at the network level, between the network itself and its members;
- 3) *relational marketing*, between the firm, its partners and its employees and, at the network level, between all actors of the network among themselves as well as with other actors;
- 4) *interactive marketing*, referred to the relationship between employees and customers and, in case of a network, between all actors and clients.

**Fig. 3: Different perspectives of marketing**



**Source:** Della Corte, 2009

From this scheme the centrality of relations springs out at different levels. Hence, the dyadic relation firm-customer overcomes the classical boundaries becoming a set of relations which involves a huge number of both internal and external stakeholders in the overall co-creation process. This cloud of relations leads to a real deconstruction of the firm and, consequently, at a distortion of the marketing process that concentrates its attention on the creation of social capital since “it helps [customer advocates and influencers] build their affiliation networks, increase their reputation and gives them access to new knowledge — all of which your customer influencers crave” (Lee, 2012). In the light of the development of firm’s social capital, it is important to select and hire the right human resources able to manage these relations according to the aim of creating innovation. In this optic, traditional marketing seems not to exist any longer. Such revolution, however, requires attention and strategic focus in the use both of new languages and tools.

In respect to this scheme, the specificity of crowdsourcing is that customer can represent one or the other actors in the general scheme, according to the strategic inputs he/she alone and with others is able to transfer to the firm.

This favors a vision that also takes into account relational view, evidencing that in such complex sets of relations, these latter themselves can generate competitive advantage; relations that, in balanced-centricity optic, can generate benefits and therefore value for the

whole network of interfacing actors.

Such an expect recalls the “relational view” (Gulati, 1998; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Kale and Singh, 1999, 2009; Kale, Dyer and Singh, 2002), which is a specific branch within RBT, more strictly concentrated on relationships as possible strategic resources. The key concept is that of collaboration through knowledge sharing and learning where parties exchange resources, collaborate and even jointly perform their own activities (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008, p. 90). Therefore interaction among customers can favour the overall ability to co-create value for all involved actors: this is nothing but a new vision of networking, that leads to service systems (Vargo, Maglio, Akaka, 2008), based on the integrating approach for innovating products as services and enhancing their provision (Chesbrough and Spohrer, 2006).

### **Crowdsourcing and new marketing opportunities**

In recent times the growing interest that firms have in virtual community has led them to choice new marketing strategies such as the crowdsourcing. Looking back at the origins of this phenomenon, it is necessary to recall the concept of co-creation appeared in the 80s (von Hippel, 1986; Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2000), when it began to emerge the concept of co-creation, which saw in the involvement of people and individuals outside to the company, a way to create a new organizational model. In this direction, the Web 2.0 has spring out as a new and innovative formula, to which crowdsourcing is heavily bound and is, in general, the evolution that, in these same years, is going from the traditional marketing to new methodological and operational approaches. In recent years, marketing has begun to abandon the transactional point of view focusing on the relational point of view, which considers the relationship with the customer a fundamental paradigm. In particular, the evolution of the *marketing* phenomenon arises from:

- *having a better understanding of the consumer*: over the years, the consumers have showed a number of increasingly articulate preferences, sophisticated and changing and this has required the companies, a continuing review of marketing efforts in order to be able to meet the will of the final consumer. This is happen through a careful analysis of the most attractive markets and the main consumer behaviors compared to the needs of consumers, the buying behavior, the consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the processes of information processing and compared, more generally,

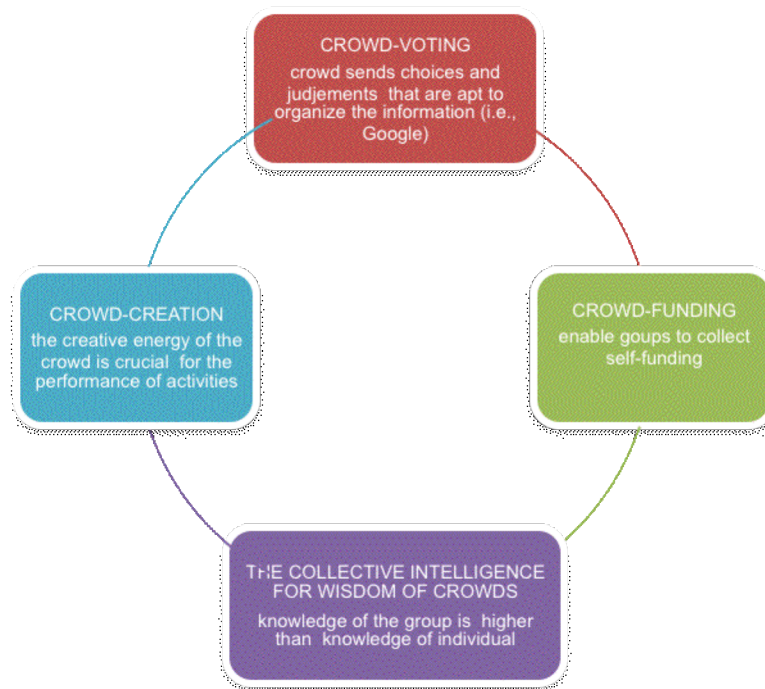
to the global demand in the short and medium-long term, to the market segmentation, the *trend* and, finally, the product life cycle (Kotler, 2004: 113);

- finding more direct forms of interaction with the consumer in order to maximize their involvement in the process of building of the product and, therefore, having the best results in terms of customer satisfaction and retention;
- *developing more aggressive forms of competition*: in recent years, competitors have become increasingly aggressive and sophisticated, they entered in competition even within the same markets. This phenomenon has been triggered by the continuing progress of products and production technologies, new techniques for monitoring the markets and the best strategic and managerial culture that has led to an increase in the level of competition (Kotler, 2004: 113);
- *respond quickly to problems of the world economy*: in recent years, changes in economic conditions are presenting both constraints and different forms of opportunities for the businesses and, therefore, should be continually monitored and anticipated at the best (Kotler, 2004: 115);

Due to continuous and rapid change of consumers' needs, competitive landscape as well as of economic environment, companies must be aware that is not enough to just react to the forces that occur in the environment, but you must take action to create tools and marketing policies that can positively influence the choices of consumers, the competitive environment and general economic conditions. To better reconstruct the evolutionary process of marketing in a company, and then the transition from traditional marketing to unconventional marketing, it's right to synthesize this phenomenon in five phases (Cova, Giordano, Pallera, 2010: 33-35): 1) *passive marketing and orientation to production* (1920-1930), where the market is characterized by a predominance of demand over offer because the customer needs virtually everything, 2) *operational marketing and sales orientation* (1930-1950), in which the market is saturated and the demand has weakened because it is found less than the offer. In these cases, the decisive variable is the choice of the consumer, which is induced to purchase a product or service by the action of stimulation and persuasion exercised by the company (advertising and promotional activities); 3) *strategic marketing and market orientation* (1950-1980), in which the marketing aims to identify new segments trying to know in advance the demand so as to ensure the offer, 4) *strategic marketing and customer orientation*, where the goal of corporate marketing is to help the customer to buy and to respond to their needs; 5) *market-driven management*, in which all functions of the company consider the environment, and then consider all the players in the market that directly or indirectly influence the

customer in the purchasing decisions and, therefore, participate in the market in a broad sense. Finally, there was a process that has witnessed the emergence of a new marketing paradigm based on the need for marketing managers that are (Boaretto, Noci, Pini, 2011): to co-create tailor-made branded experience with the customer; to manage the phenomenon of customer community, stressing the attention on interactive and multichannel brand policies; to review the communication mix towards new media controlled and managed by users. After emphasizing on the increasing involvement that, over time had, the role of customer in the process of creating the product itself, we pass now to examine the phenomenon of crowdsourcing, which sees the customer become an active part in creation of the product. In particular, the term crowdsourcing appeared for the first time, in 2006, by in an article of Jeff Howe in the U.S. magazine *Wired* (Howe, 2006). This term indicates the assignment of a task (which was traditionally contracted out to a specific outside company, then, outsourcing) to a large and, above all, undefined group of people who are contacted through an open call that anyone interested can answer. In particular, it is *"a new business model that is based on a methodology of collaboration with which companies are demanding an active contribution by the network to the users over participatory platforms such as blogs and social networks"* (Howe, 2008). The basic assumption underpinning the crowdsourcing is that "the crowd" is most functional than single entity: it has talent, creativity, and is incredibly productive (Howe, 2010: 117). In order to identify customers' needs and to respond them quickly, firms can refer to lead users, defined by user innovation theory, because they are more likely in adopting new products than the common consumer and in communicating experiences with a new product to other users (e. g. through the social networks). When they are dissatisfied with an existing product, they are able to propose improving ideas or solution for a functional new product because they possess a high degree of product-related information (Piller and Walcher, 2006). According to the crowdsourcing as a new way to involve users in new products and services development process, the different forms of crowdsourcing are listed below (Fig. 4).

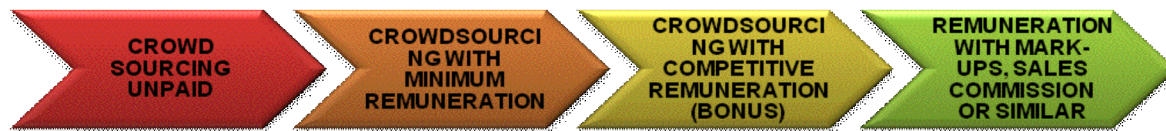
**Figure 4: Four Types of crowdsourcing activities**



**Source:** our elaboration on Howe, 2006a.

Howe explains the affirmation of this phenomenon with the increasing technological innovation and, above all, with the possibility of the mass to access it directly and in complete autonomy. This has certainly contributed to reducing the space between a rank amateur (which is identified with the community) and a professional worker. It is, therefore, an undefined group of people being asked to give a series of considerations on: the creation of new designs (community-based design) for marks for business or for web site graphics; the possible solution of a scientific or technological problem (open innovation); the possibility of including a range of information, as a writer and editor (ex. Wikipedia), or a series of activities that call for some creativity. As shown in figure 5, in its early stage, crowdsourcing was a process carried out spontaneously by a community. During the years, firms have seen the opportunities in using this phenomenon for new products and services development, so they have applied to crowdsourcing providing a minimum remuneration. In a few years, the remuneration has become a way through which firms can motivate users in providing ideas and projects (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011), even in some cases assuming the form of mark-ups on sales commission and similar.

**Figure 5: Formulas of crowdsourcing**



**Source:** our elaboration.

Furthermore, crowdsourcing can also refer to different kind of activities shaped by the community. In this case, it is possible to identify three different cases (Burger-Helmchen and Penin, 2010): *crowdsourcing of content*, for which users share a range of information, images and video; *crowdsourcing of routine activities*, in which users are involved in semi-repetitive and almost-automated activities. These activities do not require high creativity or specific skills, but they necessary depend to human capabilities. Hence, the organizational model of crowdsourcing allows firm in engaging a large number of employees with low costs in terms of spent hours and salaries; *crowdsourcing of creative activities*, for which the organization looks for talents from different fields, with different skills and different cultural backgrounds in order to solve critical issues. This concept refers to the so-called “crowd wisdom” which refers to the aggregation of solutions: the resulting solution by collective intelligence is not the average of all concerned, but the best (Surowiecki, 2004).

## **METHODS**

The main objective of this research is to investigate the reason why Turismo Emilia-Romagna (TER) chooses to apply to the crowd, analyzing the way through which it involves the community and what are TER’s resources and competences in developing crowdsourcing activities. In order to explore these hypotheses, this research uses an in-depth case study analysis (Yin, 1984, 1994, 2004).

According to the exploratory nature of this issue, a case study approach well fits to analyze the crowdsourcing phenomenon and how it can influence the marketing activities of Emilia

Romagna destination. Indeed, this method is able to capture both the richness and complexity Yin (2003) of the chosen case study.

As underlined, crowdsourcing is a recent stream of research (Howe, 2006a, b, 2008, 2010). In this direction, case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009) and can help us conducting a deep analysis in order to understand the empirical implications.

The different contributions addressed to this issue (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984, 1994; 2003; 2004; 2006; 2009; Kitay and Callus, 1998; Cassel and Symon, 2004; Stake, 1995; Robson, 2002) highlight that case study research provides an analysis of the context and processes which helps in applying the theoretical issues to real situations (Cassel and Simon, 2004).

In particular, case study analysis is helpful in exploring research hypothesis which require detailed understanding of social or organizational processes since they are characterized by a large number of data linked to the specific context.

The data was collected from different sources and triangulated in order to identify the development of Emilia Romagna crowdsourcing activities and reinforce validity.

## **THE CASE OF TURISMO EMILIA-ROMAGNA**

Emilia Romagna is a region with beautiful landscapes and lots of art, historical and natural resources. For these reasons, tourism in this region has a fundamental role.

Tourism promotion is made by Turismo Emilia Romagna, a firm shaped by two organizations: "Tourism Promotion Agency Services (APT Servizi)<sup>1</sup>" and "Unione Prodotti<sup>2</sup>". The key concept of TER is that tourists can be involved within "tourism tale" through the listening and sharing of their experiences. This highlights the idea of "narration 2.0" since the tools of the web 2.0 are used for the crowd involvement. It is then important to understand the reasons why the involvement of crowdsourcing activities is important for organizations that take care of tourism communication and promotion.

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<sup>1</sup> APT Servizi is created by Emilia Romagna Region and the system of Emilia Romagna, Chambers of Commerce who own respectively 51% and 49% of the social shares. "APT Servizi carries out projects suggested by the various components - Provinces, Municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, and both public and private operators - which make up the Regional tourist system" ([www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com](http://www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com)).

<sup>2</sup> Unioni di Prodotto (Product Grouping) represents the union between both public and private bodies who cooperate for the development of four "Product Clubs": the Adriatic Coast, Apennines & Nature, Art Cities and SPAs & Fitness ([www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com](http://www.emiliaromagnaturismo.com)).



There are at least three answers that help us in identifying the critical nodes that lead to the creation of TER:

1. Although these organizations propose tourism contents, information and news, their visibility remains scarce since the high pulverization, the lack of specific competences in building, developing and maintaining a systemic vision, through the web 2.0 platforms, that meets tourists' requirements constitute some elements that make difficult to emerge in the current competitive scenario;
2. The dispersion and pulverization of information lead to a general confusion, not only on demand side but also on the offer side since this confusion symbolizes the lack of co-ordination and co-planning activities among the different tourist stakeholders;
3. The two previous points highlight the unavoidable consequence of asymmetric perspective between the offer and the demand side. Recalling an SDL fundamental premise, symmetric information are necessary in the optic of value co-creation (Vargo and Lush, 2004a) and this assumptions well fits for the communication and promotion of a tourist destination. Indeed, as Della Corte (2000, p.2) underlines that both asymmetric and cognitive perspective occurs between the tourist and the services providers as tourist reveals a wider and more articulated vision comparing the specific and limited vision of the tourist organization and the whole destination's reference system.

TER concept springs out in order to solve these criticisms, systematizing all tourism information, serving as catalyst for the existing organizations in tourism promotion. The aim of this initiative is to reduce the information's redundancy, creating a new and official web 2.0 platforms which involves specific competences on the offer side and create interactive tools for the creation of value offers with tourists. According to this view and starting from the premise that "crowds are agents of change" (Wexler, 2011), TER has launched in 2010 some interesting initiatives based on the crowdsourcing principles. These activities are different and multifaceted according to their degree of crowd involvement. The most relevant initiatives are linked to:

- **Crowd sharing:** these activities concerns the contents suggested by the users on the main institutional walls – official TER website, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, official TER Blog, Friendfeed – through the voices "TER friends suggest", "TER friends take pictures" and "TER friend make a video".
- **Crowd interaction:** users involvement can also refer to the interaction between tourists who are looking for specific information (i.e., "Where can I find Bologna

tourist audio guide?” or “We are looking for some ideas on how to spend this week in Emilia Romagna. Can you suggest us something?”) and virtual community. This type of activities are called “Pillole di URP distribuito”<sup>3</sup> since information are shared by some important actors of this virtual community such as official tourism organizations, citizens as well as tourists that have already experienced their travel in Emilia Romagna. According to the open call, while tourism organizations supervise the reliability and accuracy of the answers of both citizens and tourists, these latter play a key role in suggesting the right information and also in creating value propositions and offers. In particular, the citizens-to-tourists interaction creates value since the listening and understanding of tourists’ requirements by the citizen aims at minimum reducing the above mentioned asymmetric information. While tourist-to-potential tourist interaction is fundamental in tourism industry as the effects of word-of-mouth (del Bosque *et al.*, 2009; Gnoth *et al.*, 2009) and, more precisely of the e-word of mouth (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2012), are becoming more and more important in “influencing consumer’s attitudes and purchase behavior” (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). The interaction between potential tourists and/or citizens and tourists as well as all the actors of the virtual community emphasizes the many-to-many logic since here the dyad customer-firm overcomes the classic boundaries to encounter other and multiple form of interactions (cross-cultural and cross-spatial interactions) that view the crowd as generator of value. These considerations emphasize the importance of the above described relations.

- **Crowd creation:** this kind of activity can be considered more dynamic and evolved since the open call to the crowd provides the creation of contents instead of a simple sharing of knowledge and information. One of the main crowd creation activities is Google maps TER, for the creation of which the users offer their suggestions, directions and corrections.
- **Indirect crowdsourcing:** it concerns the overall customer relationship management activities that regard the listening of complaints, suggestions or impressions in order to improve the quality of information, create new e-spaces or tourist services.

The previous considerations help us underline that if problem solving and solution come out from the crowd and so mutual value is created according to a balanced centrality (Gumesson, 2007), another important question springs out: “How does TER involve the customer?”.

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<sup>3</sup> “Pills of distributed URP (Public Relations Office)”.

This answer is immediate as much as complex in terms of specificity and multiplicity in using web 2.0 tools. Indeed, in the Internet era the use of web 2.0 has opened up new possibilities for creating, developing and refreshing tourism products/services according to a co-creation perspective.

TER uses Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube, official TER Blog, Friendfeed as conversation spaces able to capture tourists' needs and advices and show them how their suggestion may become practical solutions. Starting from Facebook, if a TER tourist engages in the Facebook community, he/she can obtain practical information (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004) as well as shares his/her experience through videos, photos or suggestions. While Facebook is considered of bi-directional nature, Twitter is the example of uni-directional perspective (Coulter and Roggeveen, 2012) since users may "follow" a member (e.g., TER), receiving the related information and transmit information to others. On the hand Flickr is a photosharing site, an "interesting source of change" (Cox, 2008), through which TER community tells Emilia Romagna stories, experiences and landscapes in their photos while Youtube is a videosharing platform.

The official TER blog deserves special attention since it is one of the most interactive and powerful tool of web 2.0 and its characteristics facilitate both one- and two-way communication as well as mass and interpersonal communication (Cho and Huh, 2010; Marken, 2005). The flexible nature of TER blog allows to disseminate information to the community, interacting with bloggers and sharing contents referring to Emilia Romagna tourist experiences (Bortree, 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005).

To summarize, TER involves crowds according different levels and through the tools of web 2.0 but it is necessary also to understand what are TER's resources and competences necessary to develop crowd-sourcing activities.

As we have already underlined, the systemic view is important in order to build symmetric tourist information whose contents have to reflect the variety of destination offers. Secondly, specific knowledge and skills must be able to afford some criticisms such as the single contribution (advise, question answering, information or point of interest) that needs to be verified for the clarity, accuracy and its effective relevance as well as check that its content has not promotional purpose but only the aim to enrich the virtual community.

According to this view, customers are resource integrator (Vargo and Lusch, 2008a, b), engaged in the process of value creation and mutual value exchange. In this direction, TER crowdsourcing model summarizes some key points of SDL-RBT-RV approach such as:

- 1) the dynamic interaction between the customer and the service provider leads to the creation of value offerings;
- 2) the customer vision as “operant resource” allows to co-create value proposals;
- 3) the exchange of knowledge among the actors involved improves the outcome of customer experience, perceiving a superior value-in-use.

## **FINDINGS**

According to the results, the outcomes emerging from this research are various.

First of all, it seems to be clear that, in order **to build innovative solutions, firms involve the customer in a process of value co-creation**. This is clear referring to TER, in which consumers take part to the entire process of creation and distribution of products and/or services, and actively influence it through the different communication and sharing channels.

According to the previous point, one of the key factors that is able to lead a crowdsourcing project to the success consists in involving a large number of users in the project. For this reason, **the wide application of social media allows the implementation of crowdsourcing activities**. This finding is enriched by user innovation theory, for which communities share a major value through the mutual engagement on the social network in a more direct and flexible way. TER social media are extremely active and the users’ activities are spontaneous and frequent: on TER Facebook’s fan page, for example, the crowdsourcing activities take place everyday and record lots of interactions.

Because of customers are not merely targets of strategic activities but play an active role in design and implementation of marketing policies both at induced and organic level, **these crowdsourcing activities influence marketing choices on the both two levels**, so that managers have to take into account their needs and expectations in the entire marketing process. In this way, crowdsourcing activities can be fundamental for the success of a firm because the ideas are directly generated from the customers. Ter’s choice to involve the customers in the entire creation and distribution process in a systemic view allows it to address its efforts correctly towards new marketing initiatives. According to this assumption and with reference to the empirical evidence, **if well constructed and implemented, crowdsourcing activities can even become themselves a source of competitive advantage**. Hence, the empirical evidences emerging from the analysis of this case study indicate that a well-structured process underpins the crowdsourcing activities of TER since it

explores/exploits the overall skills and competences provided by the actors which are involved in the cloud of relations. In this way, it is possible to create a vibrant community (Cogo, 2012), extremely active and dynamic in creating and sharing innovative contents, that allows not only to provide answers but also to manage different voices, putting them together and amplifying their capacity.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The present research examines the way through which organizations involve the crowd in order to create a greater value and mutual benefits.

Through the analysis of the crowdsourcing activities of Turismo Emilia Romagna, some important conclusions come out. First, in a today competitive context the co-creation of solutions is of fundamental importance since a broader group of contributors can represent a strategic resource for the firm according an RBT perspective. While, in SDL terms organizations, markets, and society as well as virtual community and, hence, the crowd represent the applications of competences (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) that are able to generate new solutions. The exchange of information, knowledge and competences between tourists' user and the virtual community that generates and enriches contents on the official web 2.0 platforms of Turismo Emilia Romagna. The crowdsourcing policies used by TER are based on the premise that information sharing and word-of mouth (Brown and Reingen, 1987) influence and shape tourist attitude and preferences both at organic and induced level.

Furthermore, TER highlights the existence of different formulas of crowdsourcing. It was possible to delineate four specific typologies: Crowd sharing, Crowd interaction, Crowd creation and Indirect crowdsourcing. These are different in contents and degree of crowd involvement. Indeed, a part from indirect crowdsourcing, the others expresses different ways of crowdsourcing that need to be conceived on an axis whose endpoints are Crowd sharing (low degree of interaction) and crowd involvement (high degree of interaction).

According to this vision, TER crowdsourcing are extremely useful for helping tourist-users in finding solutions and at the same time the crowd can help them suggesting the right thing to do in Emilia Romagna, the best experience to live, where they can find tour information or in creating new tourist services.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The first limitation to the crowdsourcing model is related to the possibility for the users to operate with this tool or not, because of their ability and computer skills. The crowdsourcing consists of an innovative democratic technology if all the users are able to access to it. The use of Internet is generally diffused, but rural communities<sup>4</sup> and people poorly, able to use it, still exist. For example, older people are not as able to access to the web as younger.

The second limitation is linked to the connection' speed: the crowdsourcing activities imply a high-speed connection because users have to share contents online, communicate large number of data and so on. In this way, organizations looking to crowdsourcing prefer to find "lighter" bandwidth alternatives to communicate and share files and documents (Brabham, 2009).

Other issues concern the construction of the web interface, because a crowdsourcing platform has to respect the characteristics of accessibility and usability that imply high costs of construction. A crowdsourcing website have to be optimally accessible for the overall users which want to use it. These services must be realized by professional web designers and can be costly, but if they are properly designed, it is possible to replicate and re-use them for future crowdsourcing activities avoiding the further design costs.

Furthermore, various issues such as timing, promotion, inclusion and dealing with crowd resistance have to be considered when an organization decides to start up with a crowdsourcing project.

It is also important to handle the creation of a crowdsourcing community through aggressive marketing policies and public relations tactics, as well as alternative communication tools, such as viral and guerrilla marketing, social networking and so on. The key factor is to create "rumors" or "buzzy contents" on the web, so that information circulate quickly.

Another challenge with crowdsourcing can be the inclusion or exclusion of individuals in the process. Starting from the concept of collective intelligence, a wide network can bring in more creative input. This idea fights against the problem sharing linked to specific geographical areas. In this way, it makes sense that some users of the community are not interested to the problem and they become hostile toward the crowdsourcing project. For this reason, the phenomenon of "crowdslapping" (Howe, 2006b) can take place. The best way for

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<sup>4</sup> Rural communities can be defined as "all territory, population, and housing units located outside of urbanized areas and urban clusters" (National Institutes of Health, USA, 2012). The gaps in ICT access take place, generally, between developed and developing countries, but also between urban and rural areas of developing countries. Technical difficulties in providing ICT access to rural populations of the developing world may occur, and the related issues often increase the unsubsidized costs beyond what they are for typical urban users. On the one side, there are added supply costs that have to be compared with the low incomes, hence ability to pay, on the other (Casparly and O'Connor, 2003).

dealing with “crowdslapping”, avoiding the problems linked to the treading on the basic free speech rights of individuals, is to create a well-designed software code that can strain users behaviors and to make up a crowd community that is able to self-regulate through community standards (Post, 1995).

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This research purposes some highlights that can lead further research. First, if the crowdsourcing is considered as a useful tool in order to gain innovative ideas, it is important to handle the selection of these ideas and the transformation of them into real innovations. In this way, further researches could focus on the application of crowdsourcing in other field of study or for “ideas competition”, taking into account the relations and the comparison between different cultures in the process.

### **MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

In order to develop a successful idea, it is important, from a managerial standpoint, that all the people involved within the construction of the crowdsourcing community have to participate, at a very early stage, in an idea competition development themselves. Their participation implies that managers have a clear opinion of the motivations and interests of the overall stakeholders and can effectively lead their planning and managing activities taking into account the useful inputs from these actors. Furthermore, in order to achieve the above mentioned competitive advantage, firms have to put great attention on the component of control. In some cases, social networks allow firms assuming the role of moderator, managing ideas, suggestions and comments before they appear on the channel. In other cases (as for forums), firms cannot avoid the publication of negative comments but can quickly respond with specific policies of bad comments management. Posts on TER fan page are always moderated by TER itself, giving information about who proposes the post, which is the subject and which is the source. The final conclusion is then that such new tools like crowdsourcing can be a relevant source of information, up to become a strategic resources themselves only if they are created and managed in a very precise way, both strategy and marketing-oriented.

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