

AN EXPLORATORY INQUIRY INTO THE ACQUISITION AND USE OF EXPORT INFORMATION BY FRENCH SMES AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This article explores the acquisition and use of export information by French small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as well as the link between export information and international performance. Besides studying different types and sources of information, it also investigates the mediating role of existing resources and external factors in performance.

Personal contacts and customer visits are perceived as the most important sources of information regarding foreign markets. However, only customer visits are positively correlated with international performance. Overall, the market information vehicles used and the information sought by French SMEs contrast with prior results obtained in the UK.

Foreign sales, as a measure of international performance applied in this study, are positively influenced by the company being a sub-supplier and by its accumulated international experience. It thus seems as though the use of “formal” market research techniques may be partly replaced by solid international experience. Similarly, the sub-contractors’ information need may be partially satisfied by their foreign partner.

Key-words: SME, international performance, information acquisition, information sources, sub-contracting, international experience.

Resumo

Este artigo explora a aquisição e o uso de informação de exportação pelas pequenas e médias empresas (PME) francesas, bem como a ligação entre informação de exportação e desempenho internacional. Além de estudar diferentes tipos e fontes de informação, investiga também o papel mediador de recursos existentes e fatores externos no seu desempenho.

Contatos pessoais e visitas a clientes são identificados como as fontes de informação mais importantes relacionadas a mercados externos. Contudo, apenas as visitas a clientes possuem correlação positiva com desempenho internacional. De maneira geral, os veículos de informação de mercado utilizados por PME francesas e as informações por elas buscadas contrastam com resultados obtidos no Reino Unido. As exportações, usadas neste estudo como medida de desempenho internacional, são positivamente influenciadas pelo fato da empresa ser um sub-fornecedor e por sua experiência internacional acumulada. Parece, então, que o uso de técnicas “formais” de pesquisa de mercado pode ser substituído em parte por sólida experiência internacional. De maneira análoga, é possível que a necessidade de informação dos sub-contratantes seja parcialmente satisfeita por seus parceiros internacionais.

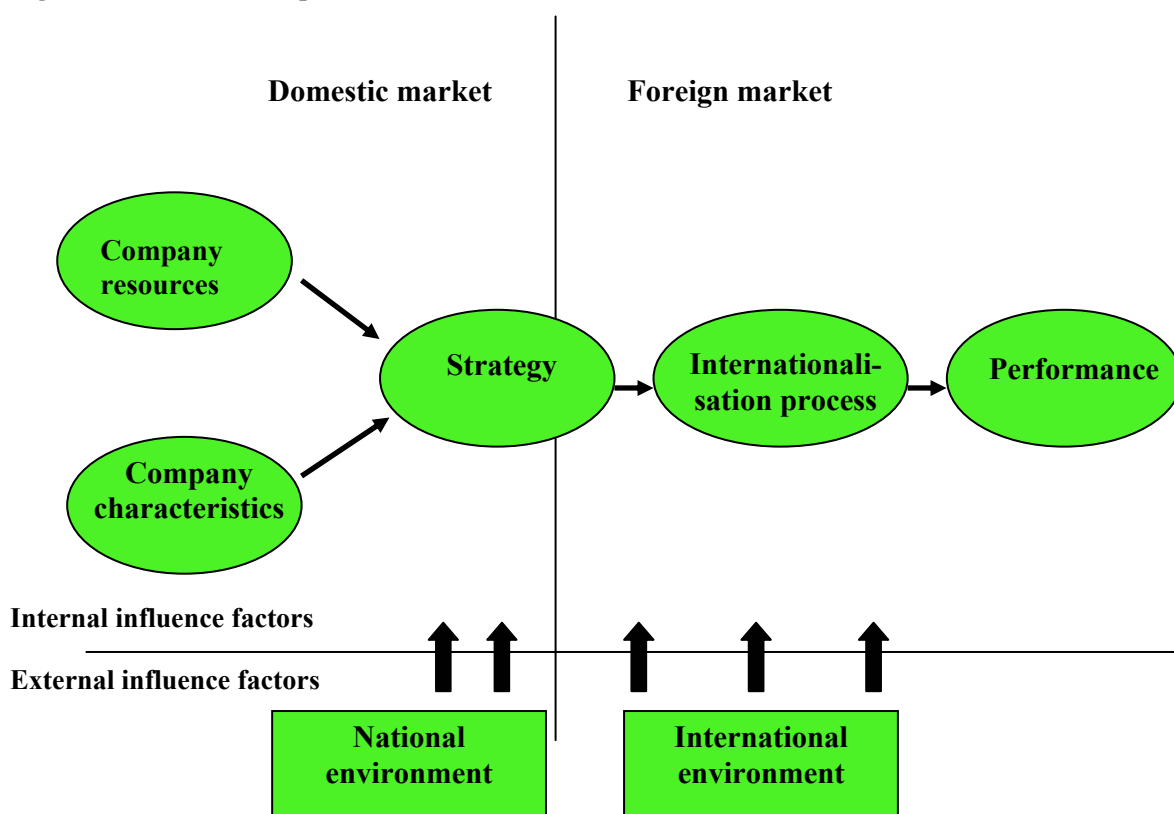
Palavras-chave: PME, desempenho internacional, obtenção de informações, fontes de informação, sub-contratação, experiência internacional.

Introduction and theoretical framework

Over the last decades, an impressive number of external and internal factors influencing the (international) performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been

identified (e.g. Lages, 2000). As schematically shown by Figure 1, the use of a company's resources and other characteristics to develop specific (international) strategies leads to different patterns of internationalisation and ultimately to international success. This process concerns both domestic and foreign markets; therefore, it is influenced by the respective environments.

Figure 1: A model of export success.



Inspired by Aaby and Slater, 1989.

Among the many factors of influence, this study focuses on the acquisition and use of information concerning foreign markets and its influence on international performance. In a global economy, the capacity to manage information and knowledge related to foreign markets is of the utmost importance for any organisation. Information collection provides a means of detecting opportunities and threats to foreign markets (MOORMAN, 1995) and, more generally, of reducing

uncertainty and risk inherent in the internationalisation process (MCAULEY, 1993; HART and TZOKAS, 1999). Overall, worldwide investments in market research have increased substantially over the last 15 years. The increasing costs of product introduction abroad and the rapidly changing international environment, among other factors, have largely contributed to the growth of the market research market (ESOMAR, 2002). Although precise figures

are difficult to obtain, it appears, however, that big multinational companies, much more than SMEs, were responsible for this evolution.

The use of market research instruments by smaller companies – and even less so the link between market research and performance – has not attracted much research interest. The literature on the internationalisation process of SMEs regularly puts forward a relative lack of resources and qualified personnel of such organisations when compared to bigger companies (e.g. BIJMOLT and ZWART, 1994). This fact may partly explain why investments by SMEs in market research techniques are low (PHIRI, 2003). Nevertheless, several studies show that (foreign) market research and, more generally, the perception and use of information about foreign markets increase the performance of SMEs (e.g. DE CHIARA and MINGUZZI, 2002; MCAULEY, 1993).

Studying UK companies, Hart and Tzokas (1999) found, however, that not all market research instruments and information types have the same impact. While the so-called “informal information sources” (customer visits, distributor agent visits, exhibitions and competitor visits) are not significantly linked to export performance, “formal information sources” (test marketing, mail surveys, telephone interviews, information seminars) are positively correlated with both export sales and export profits. It is argued that the use of the informal market research is natural for SMEs and therefore does not discriminate between successful and less successful companies. Formal information instruments, on the contrary, indicate an accrued interest in the exploration and understanding of foreign markets. Overall, however, SMEs seem to favour “informal” (also called “personal”) over “formal” procedures of information collection (LEONIDOU and KATSIKEAS, 1997). Hart and Tzokas (1999) also report that the nature of the information elements collected

influence performance. While gathering “general background infrastructure information” is shown to be significantly related to export success, “market attractiveness information” and “adaptations required for export” are not.

To our knowledge, little information regarding the (foreign) market information behaviour of French SMEs exists. Thus, the first objective of this article is to document the collection of foreign market information by French SMEs. Secondly, the extent to which the findings from other countries, and the UK in particular, are confirmed in France will be explored. This leads to the following first two research questions:

Q1: What instruments are used by French SMEs to collect information about foreign markets? Which of these instruments are linked to international performance?

Q2: To what extent do French SMEs collect “general background infrastructure information”? Is this type of information – as in the UK context – linked to international performance?

The approach of Hart and Tzokas (1999) will, therefore, be partly replicated in the French context. Besides the replication, we will explore to what extent information collection and use are influenced by specific company resources and characteristics. Information need is influenced not only by the foreign markets themselves. It also depends on the “accumulated” knowledge which employees of a given company have about the international environment. The size of the international department, as well as the international experience of the company, are examples of internal factors presumably influencing information collection. The relationship between these resources and information acquisition has rarely been researched. However, it is known that the number of employees assigned to the export department (BEAMISH, CRAIG and MCLELLAN, 1993; BAYAD, 1997), the training of the executives (DEMICK and

O'REILLY, 2000), and the competencies of the personnel (COVIELLO, GHIAURI and MARTIN, 1998; DE CHIARA and MINGUZZI, 2002) are correlated with international performance.

Furthermore, it can be argued that SMEs which are part of a (international) network have different information needs compared to other companies. More specifically, SMEs which are sub-suppliers to other companies are able to partly rely on the international knowledge of their partner. Julien (1996) shows well that one of the response strategies of the SME to internationalisation difficulties is to enter a network and/or to become sub-supplier to a big enterprise. In a wide range of export information studies, business contacts and networks were identified as the most used sources of market information (MCAULEY, 1993; DIAMANTOPOULOS and SOUCHON, 1996; LEONIDOU and ADAMS FLOROU, 1999).

Research analysing the relationship between sector of activity and SMEs' performance reports contrasting results. While some studies reveal a significant link between industry type and performance (e.g. COVIELLO, GHIAURI and MARTIN, 1998), others sustain the contrary (e.g. PELHAM, 2000). We will therefore check whether information collection and use are homogeneous across industries. To summarize, a third "contingent" research question is formulated:

Q3: To what extent is information collection and performance influenced by company resources and characteristics such as the size of the international department, the company's international experience, the integration of the company into a production network, and by industry type?

Methodology

The data were collected from three border regions in the East of France: Lorraine, Alsace and Franche-Comté. Four industries were targeted (food, furniture/wood, steel and machinery). A pre-tested mail questionnaire was sent in two waves to a total of 460 SMEs with international activities. While SMEs are frequently defined as organisations with less than 250 employees, we set this limit to 200 in this study. According to the SMEA (Small and Mid-sized Enterprises Association), in low value-added industries the number of regular employees should not exceed 200 in order to qualify as an SME.

64 companies answered the first wave of questionnaires, and another 49 companies replied during the second wave after an additional telephone re-launch. Thus, 113 usable questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 24.5%. This percentage can be considered satisfactory. Within the sample, 42 companies belong to the steel industry, 30 to the furniture and wood industry, 23 to the machinery industry, and 11 to the food industry (another 7 companies did not answer this question). Given the low number of responses for the food industry, subsequent comparisons across industries will be limited to the steel, machinery, and furniture/wood industries.

The variables concerning the various constructs were operationalised as shown in Table 1. Following the indications of a series of authors (e.g. BIJMOLT and ZWART, 1994), performance is evaluated in an objective and a subjective way. The ratio of sales abroad to the total sales of the company is used as an objective measure. Simple to calculate and also quite simple to obtain from companies, this measure is used in many studies (KUTSCHKER and SCHMID, 2002). However, because of the obvious limits of this first measure, a multidimensional subjective indicator inspired by Lages and Montgomery (2001) is employed (for details, see Table 2).

Table 1: Operationalisation of variables

Variable	Items and scales used	References
Export information instruments	9 items (information instruments used), Likert scale from 1 (“not important at all”) to 5 (“very important”), see Table 4.	The same nine items building the “informal” and “formal” information sources factors as in Hart and Tzokas (1999)
Information types	5 items (information elements), Likert scale from 1 (“not important at all”) to 5 (“very important”), see Table 3.	The same five items building the “general background infrastructure information” factor in Hart and Tzokas (1999)
(Relative) size of the international / export department	Number of employees assigned to work on the international activities over 50% of their working time divided by the total number of employees of the company.	Reuber and Fischer (1997)
Accumulated international experience	The sum of the international experience (in years) of all employees working on the international activities for more than half of their working time.	Bijmolt and Zwart (1994)
International performance	Objective measure: percentage of sales abroad Subjective measure: 4 items measuring perceived satisfaction (see Table 2).	(multiple references) Lages and Montgomery (2001)
Integration into production networks	Percentage of turnover achieved as a sub-supplier to another company.	

Table 2: Perceived satisfaction with international activities.

Items: (Likert scale, 1 to 5) “Perceived satisfaction with ...”	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor 1
- ... the turnover of the main activity abroad	2.74	1.27	0.91
- ... the profitability of the main activity abroad	3.02	1.07	0.72
- ... the market share of the main activity abroad	2.72	1.20	0.89
- ...the global performance of the enterprise overseas	2.82	1.20	0.91

Percentage of variance explained: 74.99%

Results

International Performance

Measured as the percentage of sales abroad, the performance of the companies interviewed averages 32.2 %. Perceived satisfaction with international activities is indicated in Table 2.

Measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, perceived satisfaction with international

activities is close to the “average” value of 3. Results for individual items range between 2.72 and 3.02. A factorial analysis of the four items reveals a uni-dimensional character of the scale (Cronbach Alpha = 0.88). This result confirms the findings of Lages and Montgomery (2001), who used an almost identical scale in a Portuguese survey (one dimension, Cronbach Alpha = 0.91). Adding all four items into a single measure, an “international performance” score was calculated (and used subsequently). No

significant difference concerning subjective or objective performance was found between industries.

Type of information collected

The SMEs contacted declared themselves more interested in information regarding the economic background of export markets (mean = 3.41) and general market growth (3.48) than in information concerning the social and political market environment

(2.93), transport infrastructures (2.77) or governmental aids to exporting (2.72).

After the suppression of the item “governmental aid”, a principal components analysis reveals a one-dimensional structure of the remaining four items, explaining 63.5% of variance and possessing a satisfactory Cronbach Alpha of 0.8. Based on these results, a new “score variable” termed “the perceived importance of different information types” was created by adding the values of the four items into a single measure.

Table 3: Perceived importance of different information types.

Items: (Likert scale, 1 to 5) “... importance of different information types ...?”	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor 1
- governmental aid to exporting	2.72	1.28	
- social/political background of export market	2.93	1.03	0.80
- economic background of export market	3.41	0.95	0.83
- transport infrastructure	2.77	1.12	0.75
- market growth	3.48	1.14	0.78

Percentage of variance explained: 63.5%

Comparing the perceived importance of information types across industries (analysis of variance), no significant differences were found.

Information instruments and sources employed

The perceived importance of nine different information sources was evaluated by means of a five-point Likert scale (see Table 4). Personal contacts (mean = 3.86) and customer visits (3.91) proved to be the most important sources of information regarding foreign markets. Mail surveys (1.71) and information seminars were perceived as the least important (1.96). These findings confirm the results of Hart and Tzokas (1999), Diamantopoulos et al. (1999), showing that SMEs prefer more “personal” information sources.

With two exceptions, information use is homogeneous across industries. Comparisons (analysis of variance) across industries show that SMEs belonging to the machinery industry assign higher value to visits to distributors / agents compared with companies from the steel and furniture / wood industries ($p < 0.008$); they also find participation at trade fairs / exhibitions more important than SMEs from the furniture / wood industry ($p < 0.005$).

In order to reduce the data to a smaller number of underlying dimensions, a principal components analysis (with a vari-max rotation) of the nine information sources was undertaken. Three factors explaining 61.77% of the variance emerged (see Table 4). The first factor can be called “direct market information”. It includes two items: “visits to distributors / agents” and “participation at trade fairs/exhibitions”. The second factor, subsequently named “distant information

instruments”, is composed of two items: “mail surveys” and “telephone interviews”. The third factor, named “relational information”, contains three items: “customer visits”, “competitor visits” and “personal contacts”.

Interestingly, our results contrast with the findings of Hart and Tzokas (1999). Investigating the same nine information

sources and instruments, those authors found a bi-dimensional structure termed “formal instruments” on the one side (tests marketing, mail surveys, information seminars and telephone interviews) and “informal instruments” (customer and distributor agents visits, participation at trade fares, competitor visits) on the other.

Table 4: Perceived importance of nine information sources

Items: (Likert scale, 1 to 5) <i>“How important do you consider the following information sources?”</i>	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
- visits to customers	3.85	1.18			0.75
- visits to distributors / agents	2.92	1.48	0.80		
- participation at trade fares / exhibitions	3.02	1.40	0.81		
- competitor visits	2.20	1.13			0.68
- personal contacts	3.86	1.00			0.69
- tests marketing	1.92	1.16			
- mail surveys	1.71	0.94		0.77	
- telephone interviews	2.73	1.26		0.75	
- information seminars	1.96	1.01			

Percentage of variance explained: 61.77%

The relationship between information collection and performance

Among the five items measuring the perceived importance of different information types, only the item “... information relative to the governmental aid to exporting” is significantly correlated with the measures of international performance. It is negatively correlated with both the subjective measure (correlation coeff. = -0.23; p=0.02) and the objective measure (-0.21; p=0.02) of performance. This finding contrasts with our research expectations.

None of the nine information vehicles is significantly correlated with the objective measure of international performance. Four vehicles, namely customer visits (correlation

coeff. = 0.2; p=0.03), test marketing (-0.25; p=0.01), mail surveys (-0.24; p=0.01) and the participation at information seminars (-0.23; p=0.01), are significantly correlated with the subjective measure of international performance. It should be noted that the correlation of the latter three information vehicles with performance is negative. Companies considering these sources of information important are less satisfied with international performance than others.

The relationship between company characteristics/resources and performance

Multiple step-wise regression analysis indicates that “objective” international performance is positively influenced by the

accumulated international experience and the percentage of sales achieved as a sub-supplier. The relative number of employees working in the international department has no significant influence on objective performance. As Table 5 shows, the adjusted

regression coefficient is relatively low (0.148), indicating that international performance is heavily influenced by variables not taken into account in this study. However, the regression model as a whole is highly significant ($F=8.566, p<0.001$).

Table 5: Multiple step-wise regression with the “objective” measure of international performance as dependent variable.

Dependent variable	Objective performance	
	β coefficient	Variable t-statistic (p values)
Independent variables		
Relative number of employees working on the international activities	0.099	0.805 (0.844)
Accumulated international experience	0.242	2.098 (0.040)
Percentage of sales achieved as a sub-supplier	0.346	2.998 (0.004)
$R = 0.401; R^2 = 0.161; R^2_{adj.} = 0.148$		
$F=8.566; p<0.001$		

No significant relationship between the three types of resources / characteristics just mentioned and the “subjective” measure of performance was observed.

Discussion and Conclusions

French SMEs perceive personal contacts and customer visits as the most important sources of information regarding foreign markets. Mail surveys and information seminars are perceived as the least important. Only customer visits are positively correlated with (the subjective measure of) international performance. As other studies have found before, a close relationship with clients seems to favour international success. On the contrary, test marketing and mail surveys are negatively correlated with the subjective measure of international performance. Probably, such more sophisticated, lengthy and costly market research techniques are not adapted to small companies with relatively low international market research budgets.

Minor differences appear in the perception of information vehicles across industries. SMEs belonging to the machinery industry assign higher value to distributors / agents as a source of information when compared to companies from both the steel and furniture / wood industry; they also find the participation at trade fairs / exhibitions more important compared to SMEs from the furniture / wood industry. However, no differences in international performance are found between industries.

The SMEs contacted seem more interested in information regarding the economic background of the export market and general market growth than in information concerning the social and political market environment, transport infrastructure or governmental aids to exporting. The perceived usefulness of information on governmental aids to exporting even turns out to be negatively correlated with objective and subjective export performance. It appears that information on governmental aid to exporting is not highly valued by SMEs which are successful in foreign markets. Interestingly,

participation at information seminars – often organised by public organisations – was also found to be negatively correlated with international performance. We can only speculate about the reasons of this finding, which contrasts sharply with results obtained in the UK. There, the “general background information” factor (including “governmental aid to exporting”) was found to be linked to international success. Either the more successful French SMEs forgot that they had themselves used information on governmental aids in an earlier phase of their international development, or they have never relied on such help. Perhaps their own resources allowed them to penetrate foreign markets without public assistance.

No significant link between the resources / characteristics of the company (size of the international department, the company’s international experience, the integration of the company into a production network) and the information collection vehicles used can be established.

However, foreign sales as a measure of international performance are positively influenced by the company being a sub-supplier and also by its accumulated international experience. Bigger SMEs are more likely to possess the internal resources necessary for international development. The need to employ “formal” market research techniques may be somehow replaced by solid international experience. Similarly, sub-contractors’ information need may be partially satisfied by their foreign partner. This would explain why sub-contractors – although they use the same information vehicles as the rest of the sample - are more successful internationally.

The fact that none of the company resources / characteristics tested in this study is significantly linked to the subjective measure of performance is surprising and calls for future research. For the time being, the sense of the relationship between company characteristics and international performance

cannot be determined without ambiguity. It may well be that the accumulated international experience has a positive influence on foreign sales. At the same time, it can be argued that international sales in turn also have an influence on the international experience of the company. We therefore agree with the conclusion of Seringhaus (1988, p. 100) who confirms that “competitive competence rests in the major way on a firm’s level of export-related skill, the learning that takes place and the knowledge that flows from it”.

Implications and Limits

On the managerial side, this research provides us with a better understanding of the profile of French SMEs with international activities - and enables us to identify certain differences between them and SMEs in the UK. More importantly, it gives a first detailed account about acquisition of information on foreign markets by French SMEs. Some factors possibly leading to better international performance have been identified.

The companies contacted in three border regions of the East of France achieve almost one third of their sales abroad. Not surprisingly, the most important foreign markets are the border countries Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg. On average, a little more than seven persons are assigned to international activities. These “international” employees rarely are foreigners. On average, only one of the seven employees has already worked in the international field before. The accumulated international experience of the personnel slightly exceeds 17 years on average.

On the research side, this study provided a means of testing the validity of several scales designed and previously used in other countries. The scale measuring international performance of Lages and Montgomery (2001), as well as one factor of information

type identified by Tzokas and Hart (1999), can be considered as validated in the French context. However, the division of information collection vehicles into “formal” and “informal” instruments, as perceived by UK companies, is not confirmed in France. Instead, a three-dimensional structure of information vehicles emerges (“direct market information”, “distant information instruments”, “relational information”).

The limits of this research are numerous. Most importantly, many internal (e.g. managers' perception of foreign markets, their strategy) and external factors known to influence international behaviour (e.g. the number of markets served, the competitive environment of the markets) were not checked in this study. Also, several independent variables are only linked to the objective (not the subjective) measure of international success. This measure can be criticised for multiple reasons: for example, it may be argued that foreign sales are not only the result of but also the reason for certain company characteristics. Furthermore, it is impossible to evaluate to what extent our sample is representative of SMEs in the East of France. However, with regard to the central variable of “percentage of sales abroad”, the average value of this study (32.2%) lies within the range officially communicated by the regions concerned (between 30% and 35%).

With regard to information vehicles, it would have been useful to evaluate not only perceived importance but also the actual use of information vehicles by SMEs. As Cantegreil (1991, cited by Léger, 1995) observes, there can be a difference between the thinking and the acting of SME managers. Finally, future research should be directed toward direct comparisons between SMEs from France and other countries. Such comparisons (see for example Diamantopoulos et al., 1999) are best suited to identify country- or culture-specific characteristics of export behaviour.

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