

# A MARKETING APPROACH IN PROVIDING INTERNATIONALIZATION SUPPORT SERVICES TO ITALIAN SMES

by *Giorgio Gandellini, Giulia Tatananni*

## **Abstract**

*Despite the suggestions of an abundant literature the need to adopt a marketing approach in providing internationalization support services to SMEs, most public bodies which have the aim of helping companies in their internationalization endeavors do not comply with these guidelines. This has negative implications in terms of effectiveness and efficiency of the services.*

*The research project, summarized in this paper, consisted in a cluster analysis of about 111 SMEs of southern Italy that allowed the identification of three segments of companies, different in terms of involvement and readiness to internationalize and with different needs in terms of internationalization support services. Based on the characteristics and needs of each segment, it is possible to suggest different and more appropriate support services.*

*The study contributes to the literature by providing an empirical analysis that further emphasizes the need to align the supply to the demand of support services. Moreover, the paper suggests to public bodies a feasible and basic marketing approach for better supporting SMEs' internationalization processes.*

**Keywords:** *internationalization, marketing, SMEs', support services*

**Jel Classification:** *024*

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## **1. Introduction**

Internationalization, due to the widespread globalization of business and the exponential growth of ICTs and social media, is increasingly of interest, for choice or necessity, also to SMEs (Leontiades, 1995; Caroli, 2011).

However, most SMEs, particularly in Italy among the industrialized countries, rarely exploit the internationalization opportunities, either because they are unable to overcome the related barriers, or just because they perceive these obstacles as insurmountable. It is possible to classify the barriers to internationalization in four main categories (Bedotto and Resmini,

1997): financial, operational, informative and motivational.

It is worth noting that the perception of the type of barrier tends to change based on SMEs' size, experience and presence abroad (OECD, 2008; European Commission, 2010).

Many of these barriers can be removed thanks to supporting services delivered to SMEs by public or private organizations (Czinkota, 1996; Resmini and Saviolo, 1997; Wilkinson and Broughters, 2006). In fact, SMEs' internationalization is an objective pursued by many policy makers worldwide, since, beyond being an opportunity for the individual companies, produces positive results for the entire countries (UNCTAD, 1994; Fischer and Reuber, 2003; Onida, 2014; Becattini, 1989, 2000; Cipolla and Urbani, 2002; Bersani and Letta, 2004; Cafferata, Cerruti, 2005; Caroli, 2006; Varaldo et al. 2009; Rullani, 2006; Cedrola and Battaglia, 2012). The support services' objectives are both the cooperation between public bodies and local companies, and the economic development of the territories (Brocanello and Cecacci, 2017; Brocanello and Paoli, 2013; Becattini, 1989, 2000; Caroli, 2006).

Depending on the type of barrier that needs to be overcome, these services can be classified into financial or real support services (managerial/organizational). Our paper is focused on the second category, that includes promotional, informative, educational, and technical assistance services.

In particular, real support services improve companies' internationalization attitude and performance (Czinkota, 1996; Resmini and Saviolo, 1997; Wilkinson e Brouthers, 2006).

However, despite their usefulness, the real support services are not so much used because SMEs are not always able to express the demand for services and the public bodies are unable to address their offer in the right way (Buratti, 1997; Pagliacci 2009, European Commission – DG Enterprise, 2002).

From this point of view, we are facing a market in which SMEs are the "demand" and public bodies are "the supply" (Gandellini and Possati, 2001), without a sufficient alignment between them.

The aim of the paper is to highlight how public bodies could adopt a marketing approach, normally adopted by private firms, in providing internationalization support services, starting from an awareness and understanding of the demand's needs. This approach could have a positive impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the internationalization policies.

Further developing some insights suggested by the literature review (section 2), we conducted an empirical analysis (section 3) on a sample of 111 SMEs of Southern Italy involved in an educational program provided by the Italian major public body in the area of internationalization. The analysis had the objective of answering the following major question: is it possible to segment SMEs based on their "international involvement" and "readiness" to face the challenges of internationalization, in order to identify groups of companies substantially different in terms of characteristics

and needs for support services? In order to answer this question, we collected data from the SMEs' sample through a survey, and then performed a cluster analysis to see whether it was possible to identify meaningful and differentiated clusters in terms of needs for this type of services.

The findings, despite the fact that the analysis was conducted on a specific case not necessarily representative of all the Italian population of exporting SMEs, suggest some general implications (section 5). In that sense, the paper can provide several managerial guidelines to the public bodies that are willing to improve the effectiveness of their programs, and contributes to the existing literature proposing an application of the marketing segmentation approach, identifying 3 archetypes of SMEs and suggesting a different set of services based on their peculiar characteristics,

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. The market of real internationalization support services*

The public support to internationalization is a topic deeply studied by many authors (Musso, 2006; Caroli 2007; Wright et al., 2007; Micelli et al. 2008; Caroli and Fatocchi, 2010; Bannò and Piscitello, 2010; Compagno, 2011; Vignola and Marchi, 2012; Bannò and Morandi, 2013). Beyond the different classifications proposed in the literature (Bello and Williamson, 1985; Valikangas and Lehtien, 1994; Diamantopoulos et al., 1993; Kotabe and Czinkota, 1992; Secchi, 1985; Esposito, 2005; Alessandrini, 1991), the real support services should provide SMEs with the competencies, skills and knowledge needed to manage the internationalization process and overcome the operational, informative, and motivational barriers (Dalli and Piccaluga, 1994; Gençturk and Kotabe, 2001; Farella, 2000, Bedotto et al., 1997). In Europe, the average percentage of SMEs that declare positive effects from real support services is around 90% (European Commission, 2015).

SMEs' limited resources and competencies are the major reasons of the existence and usefulness of these services but, at the same time, the same companies' characteristics can reduce the usage and effectiveness of the services.

In fact, despite the usefulness of most services to internationalization, their adoption remains limited (Seringhaus, 1987; Moini, 1998) due to the lack of SMEs' awareness of the existence of services, and their inability to recognize the specific needs that could be satisfied and exploit the related potential benefits. In Europe, the degree of awareness varies among industries but, in general, the percentage of firms that are aware of the existence of public programs in this area is equal or below 25%. More precisely, whereas in

the manufacturing and wholesale trade sectors 20% to 25% of all SMEs are aware of these support measures, in the retail trade, transport and personal services the ratio is 13% or less (European Commission, 2015).

In Italy, between 2007 and 2011, only 14% of companies that started exporting initiatives used information or financial services offered by public institutions (D'Aurizio and Cristadoro, 2015).

Evidently, SMEs' difficulties in identifying their own needs, looking for the appropriate services, and choosing suppliers, affect their final degree of satisfaction in using the services. Indeed, firms perceive a high degree of coherence between "requested" and "delivered" services, but a significant discrepancy between delivered services and actual needs. This means that firms do not know exactly which type of service they could and should request, and perceive the discrepancies only ex-post (Gandellini and Possati, 2001). In brief, the limited use of supporting services, and the difficulties in formulating a specific demand, are a consequence of SMEs' inability to identify their own needs, the suppliers' low visibility, the lack of adequate information (European Commission – DG Enterprise, 2002), the absence of an appropriate market segmentation, and the fact that services are insufficiently targeted to specific needs (Gray, 1997; Seringhaus and Rosson, 1990). For all the above reasons, there is a significant portion of the demand that is just latent or potential: this means that many companies are not able to perceive the need for services or feel a need that is not adequately met by suppliers (Buratti, 1997; Pagliacci, 2009).

## *2.2. Adoption of a marketing approach: the segmentation*

In that context, an important political challenge is providing support services after a deep understanding of SMEs' needs and aspirations (Wright et al., 2007), aligning demand and supply and targeting the various services to their appropriate recipients (European Commission, 2015).

Despite the recurrent critiques to the top-down approach in providing support services (i.e. ignoring the demand's needs), this approach has been adopted for decades. Only recently we can see few virtuous cases of the "bottom-up" approach (i.e. based on the delivery of services in accordance with the analysis of the various needs), but most public organizations are still far away from adopting this logic. In fact, we can often see that the same service (for example, a training course) is offered with exactly the same contents and structure to very different companies that, obviously, have very different needs and goals. As anticipated above, the first step in the adoption of a bottom-up marketing approach consists in segmenting the market in order to align demand and supply and target the services to their appropriate recipients. Segmentation means identifying groups of potential users that could deserve, at least in principle, appropriate and

differentiated service offerings.

Many studies tried to segment, in some way, the demand of internationalization services, via the identification of groups of firms with different needs: the segmentation criteria could be both subjective and objective (Bedotto and Resmini, 1996). Among the objective criteria, we can mainly list the following: firms' size, type of products and industry, and ownership structure. Many empirical studies (Resmini and Saviolo, 1997; Gandellini and Possati, 2001) have shown that firms' size significantly affects the frequency and amount of demand for services. Smaller companies show limited needs for services, and, in case, tend to satisfy them internally, but also larger companies are not heavy users, since they assume, sometimes wrongly, that their internal competencies are sufficient for addressing most internationalization issues. The firms within the 10-50 employee range are the relatively heavier users of services, aware of the greater complexity of the international context in comparison to the domestic one, and with limited managerial competencies. Furthermore, the larger the firms' size, the more different are the types of services that are requested: larger firms mainly use services aimed at creating and consolidating relationships with international clients, through offices based in the various countries, while smaller firms need to be helped in the areas of promotion and marketing intelligence (Bello and Williamson, 1985). Another objective criterion for segmenting the market is the ownership structure: in particular, some studies found that the demand for services varies, qualitatively and quantitatively, between family-based firms, that tend to be less willing to look for external resources, and those that can count on a more advanced managerial culture (Napolitano and De Nisco, 2011).

More recently, some studies investigated the demand characteristics based on subjective criteria, i.e. according to the firms' behaviour in relation to the stages in their internationalization process and the related needs in terms of barriers to overcome (Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980; Alessandrini, 1997; Costa et al., 2002; Fischer and Reuber, 2003; Pagliacci, 2009).

### **3. Empirical analysis**

#### *3.1. The goal and the methodology*

Beyond the various research approaches and classifications, most studies converge in emphasizing the heterogeneity of the needs for services among firms. The goal of our study was to investigate the meaningfulness of a segmentation of firms of southern Italy based on their "international involvement" and their "readiness" to face the challenges of internationalization, in order to identify classes of firms sufficiently diverse - but internally ho-

homogeneous – in terms of characteristics and needs for support services. Our suggested segmentation method and conclusions consider both the objective and the subjective characteristics of the firms potentially interested in services. For this purpose, we set up the research in four methodological steps illustrated in following figure and explained in the subsequent sections:

*Fig. 1 - Methodological steps of the research. Source: personal elaboration*

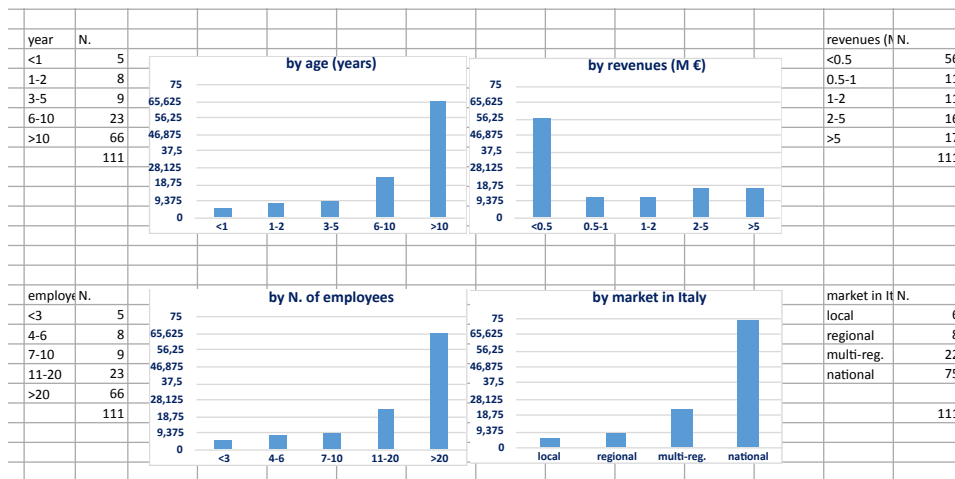


*Source: personal elaboration.*

### *3.2 Data collection and selection of variables*

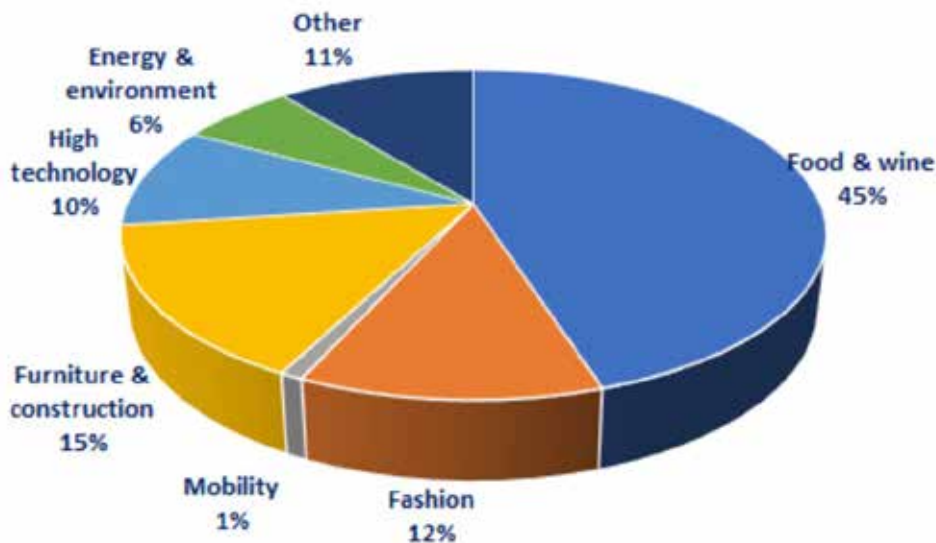
The first phase of our project consisted in the construction of a dataset from an appropriate sample of companies. The sample consisted in 111 SMEs of southern Italy involved in the same program promoted by one of the major Italian public institutions that provide internationalization services. All of them were therefore already involved in internationalization activities or willing to undertake them. The sampled SMEs were very diversified in terms of type and amount of resources, degree of internationalization and type of industry (see figures below) .

Fig. 2 - Details about the sample: N. of companies. Source: personal elaboration.



Source: personal elaboration.

Fig. 3 - Industries represented in the sample. Source: personal elaboration



Source: personal elaboration.

The descriptive data were collected with a structured survey administered via web and followed by personal interviews.

The survey was organized in different conceptual sections, with the aim of investigating the firms' resources and their export readiness. In particular, the survey consisted in a set of questions about basic company informa-

tion (answered independently by companies) and a set of questions related to the companies' resources and managerial behavior (answered during a personal interview). We complemented the web survey with personal interviews in order to make sure that critical questions were interpreted by everyone in the correct way. The survey was structured in 6 sections (see table 1). Each section represented a conceptual variable of our analysis and consisted in one or more questions. The answers to each question had a single score that contributed, through a weighted average, to form an overall score of the company in each specific section. Accurately choosing the variables was one of the most critical aspects of the study, since we incurred the risk of multicollinearity, i.e. the extent to which one variable could be explained by other variables: this is an important problem in multivariate techniques, due to the difficulty of assessing the actual impact of an individual variable, potentially affected by the interrelations with the others. In cluster analysis, the multicollinearity can be interpreted as a way of implicitly "weighting" the variables (Hair et al., 2005).

*Tab. 1: Survey structure and clustering variables.*

Section of the survey	Specific topics addressed	Clustering variables
Degree of international presence	Years of international presence	"Presence_abroad"
	People assigned to business abroad	
	Number of sales(wo)men abroad	
	Number of agents abroad	
	Geographical distance from target countries	
	Participation as exhibitors in international trade shows	
Information collection (practice and sensitivity to the importance of collecting information about clients and competitors)	Market research	"Collection_info"
	Information on customers	
	Information on competitors	
	Sources of local and international information in Italy	
	Sources of international information abroad	
Revenues from abroad	Percentage of revenues from export	"Revenue_abroad"
Organization (degree of adequacy of the organization, in terms of structure, responsibilities, and management of the internal processes)	People in charge of internationalization	"Organization"
	Definition of objectives	
	Profitability control	
	Budgeting process	
	Frequency of complaints	
Sophistication of the information systems, firm's reactivity and technical knowledge of international trade	Adequacy of the information system on sales data	"InformationSystem_reactivity_knowledge"
	Ways of selecting foreign markets	
	Management of marketing information	
	Management and control of sales activities	
	Management of complaints and reactivity	
	Degree of knowledge of international trade techniques	
Commitment to internationalization	Commitment in terms of time, human and financial resources	"Investments"

*Source: personal elaboration.*

In order to verify the presence of multicollinearity and whether the different variables could represent sets of variables correlated among themselves (risk of assigning more weight to a type of variables at the expense of others), we preliminarily conducted a factor analysis. From the following



output we can see that, in general, the correlation scores are not very high, with the exception of few cases (score > 0.3 for some variables – table 2).

*Tab 2: Correlation between variables.*

Clustering variables	Presence_abroad	Collection_info	Revenue_abroad	Organization	Information system_reactivity_knowledge	Investment
Presence_abroad	1.000	0.261	0.625	0.229	0.204	0.424
Collection_info	0.261	1.000	0.221	0.447	0.554	0.254
Revenue_abroad	0.625	0.221	1.000	0.156	0.093	0.315
Organization	0.229	0.447	0.156	1.000	0.562	1.000
InformationSystem_reactivity_knowledge	0.204	0.554	0.093	0.562	1.000	0.156
Investment	0.424	0.254	0.315	0.249	0.156	1.000

*Source: personal elaboration.*

The factor analysis shows the presence of two components/factors, to which our variables can be distinctly attributed (table 3): indeed, each variable shows a high level of saturation just for a single component/factor. Considering the nature of the variables, and the fact that they are distinctly associated with the factors, we can interpret them as indicators, respectively, of degree of “readiness” to face the international challenges (component 1) and of “international involvement” (component 2).

*Tab. 3: Rotated Factor matrix.*

	Principal Component	
	1	2
Information system-reactivity-knowledge	0,871	
Organization	0,797	
Collection_info	0,769	
Presence_abroad		0,862
Revenue_abroad		0,848
Investment		0,642
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.		
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.		

*Source: personal elaboration.*

The presence of multicollinearity in the cluster analysis could be a problem if there is a disproportionate number of variables within the various factors. A good balance, in terms of number of variables for each factor, is therefore necessary: this minimizes any implicit weighting and potential hidden effects on the analysis (Hair et al., 2005). In our case, each factor is made of three variables, and therefore the multicollinearity does not represent a problem for the cluster analysis.

### *3.3. Cluster analysis*

After building the dataset and checking the variables, the next step consisted in performing a cluster analysis. In order to group the units of observation (SMEs), we adopted the so-called mixed method, which implies the initial use of a hierarchical agglomerative method for the identification of the number of groups. Subsequently, we repeated the analysis with a non-hierarchical method, using the number of groups previously identified with the hierarchical analysis, in order to reach an optimal allocation of all units to the various groups (Hair et al., 2005). Among the various measures of the distance between units and groups, we adopted the most popular one: the squared Euclidean distance.

The cluster analysis is sensitive to the differences among scales, and tends to assign a higher weight to the variables that present a broader range of values (Hair et al., 2005). The answers to the questions used to classify the units, and the indicators developed from these answers, were designed with different numerical scales, and therefore subsequently standardized in order to remove potential distortions.

The major decision to be made for performing a hierarchical analysis is the choice of the grouping algorithm. We chose the Ward's method, which groups the units so that a merge of two groups implies the minimum possible increase of the variance within groups (Hair et al., 2005).

The output of the hierarchical analysis is a Dendrogram: we selected the optimal number of clusters "cutting" the Dendrogram in order to avoid major leaps between distances. The choice of the best approach for this operation should represent an acceptable compromise between the number of groups and the degree of homogeneity within groups. We therefore identified three clusters.

After having identified the optimal number of clusters with the hierarchical analysis, in order to reach a precise allocation of the units (SMEs) to the different segments/groups we conducted a non-hierarchical analysis with the k-means algorithm.

### 3.4 Exploratory analysis

We can summarize the characteristics of the identified segments/groups with an exploratory analysis of our data (table 4).

*Tab. 4: Variables' means for each cluster, and size of clusters. For each variable, the range of scores is shown in brackets.*

<b>Clustering variables</b>	Non exporting companies or export companies with low potential	Non exporting companies or export companies with high potential	Established and committed exporting companies
<b>Component 1 - "Readiness"</b>			
Organization (0-100)	47.0	77.7	73.2
Information system-reactivity-knowledge (0-100)	41.8	70.8	63.3
Collection_info (0-100)	34.9	61.5	59.4
<b>Component 2 - "international involvement"</b>			
Presence_abroad (0-100)	13.0	20.9	49.6
Investment (1-5)	3.5	3.8	4.2
Revenue_abroad (0-100)	6.4	6.7	70.6
<b>Other variables</b>			
Employees (1-5)	2.4	3.5	2.7
Revenue (1-5)	1.9	3.0	2.0
Age of firm (1-5)	3.8	4.6	4.5
Credibility* (0-100)	32.7	44.5	49.5
Usage of consultants (1-5)	3.8	4.3	4.1
<b>Number of units in the clusters</b>	47.0	47.0	17.0

*Source: personal elaboration.*

*\*Credibility refers to the presence of certifications, patents, trademarks, and sales material.*

Looking at the average values of the relevant variables, we can extract the most significant information about each segment and assign "labels" in order to highlight its distinctive characteristics. We defined the three segments as follows.

- **Segment 1:** non-exporting companies or exporting companies with low potential. In this segment, we find companies with the character-

istics listed in the table: if they export, the share of export revenues is limited (about 6%). We define them “with low potential” since, beyond their low level of involvement abroad, in terms of both presence (13 vs. 20.9 and 49.6 in the other segments, on a scale from 0 to 100) and investment (3.5 vs. 3.8 and 4.2 in the other segments, on a scale from 1 to 5), their performance is unsatisfactory in the areas of organization, information collection, and knowledge. They very rarely use consultants and external resources, and their credibility is limited. On average, they are the smallest (in terms of both revenues and employees), and have been operating in the Italian market for the lowest number of years.

- **Segment 2:** non-exporting companies or exporting companies with high potential. The companies in this segment also have a low share of export revenues (about 6%), but are more structured in their approach to the foreign markets (presence abroad of 20.9), and their degree of commitment to internationalization, in terms of human and financial resources, is (or it is planned to be) significant. We define them “with high potential”, due to their high levels of knowledge, organizational capabilities, and familiarity with information collection. Furthermore, they show good levels of credibility, i.e. they tend to support their marketing activities with certifications, patents, trademarks, and sales material, which are very important when we want to enter new markets. On average, they are in the 7-20 employee bracket, with revenues between 1 and 2 million euros, and have been active in the Italian market for many years.
- **Segment 3:** established and committed exporting companies. These companies are characterized by a high percentage of export revenues (about 70%) and a well-structured presence abroad (49.6): they therefore commit significant resources (human and financial) to the development and consolidation of their presence. Like the “high potential” firms, they show a good performance in terms of organizational capabilities, technical knowledge, familiarity with information collection, and credibility in the foreign markets. On average, they are smaller than those of segment 2, but they have been operating in the Italian market for many years as well.

### 3.5 Targeting

As we said, the three groups of SMEs have different characteristics, and, consequently, different needs in terms of internationalization services. Based on the literature review (see section 2) and the analysis of the results of the cluster analysis (see section 3.4), we suggested for each cluster a possible set of services (table 5).

Services	Non-exporting companies or export companies with low potential	Non-exporting companies or export companies with high potential	Established and committed exporting companies
<b>Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Case histories</li> <li>- General information for a first orientation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Market guides</li> <li>- Customized commercial statistics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customized commercial statistics</li> <li>- Confidential information about foreign firms</li> <li>- Updates on new market trends</li> </ul>
<b>Training and education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seminars for a first orientation</li> <li>- International marketing training</li> <li>- Contracts and legal training</li> <li>- Export documents and procedures training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seminars for a first orientation</li> <li>- Export manager training</li> <li>- Contracts and legal training</li> <li>- Training on export documents and procedures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advanced marketing training</li> <li>- Specific training on countries</li> </ul>
<b>Operational and strategic assistance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part-time junior export manager</li> <li>- Strategic consultancy for the identification of foreign target countries</li> <li>- Personal advisor for 1 year</li> <li>- Research of customers and partners abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part-time junior export manager</li> <li>- Strategic consultancy for the identification of foreign target countries</li> <li>- Organization and support of business meetings abroad</li> <li>- Research of customers and partners abroad</li> <li>- Personal advisor for 1 year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- HR recruiting (in Italy and abroad)</li> <li>- Use of public institutions' agencies abroad</li> <li>- Focused market research</li> <li>- Assistance on foreign regulations (legal, fiscal, customs, ...)</li> </ul>
<b>Promotion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Business tours abroad</li> <li>- Fairs and events</li> <li>- Virtual shop window</li> <li>- E-commerce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Business tours abroad</li> <li>- Study tours abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trade show and events</li> <li>- Virtual shop window</li> <li>- E-commerce</li> <li>- Communication on foreign media</li> <li>- Company presentation and press conferences</li> <li>- Incoming missions of foreign journalists</li> </ul>

*Table 5 Example of classification of support services for each group of SMEs. Source: personal elaboration.*

In order to validate the suggested allocation of services to the different groups, we interviewed internationalization consultants with more than 20 years of experience and a manager of the Italian public body.

#### **4. Conclusions and directions for future research**

Based on our findings, we can draw some general conclusions that contribute to the existing literature, and suggest specific managerial guidelines to the public bodies in charge of supporting SMEs in their internationalization endeavors. In particular, as we said, we found clusters with different characteristics and heterogeneous needs in a sample of SMEs involved exactly in the same support program. Our findings could promote the use of a marketing approach among public bodies, that are rarely market-oriented and normally less familiar with the use of strategic information systems. Thanks to an appropriate market segmentation, it should be easier for these bodies to propose to each type of companies the most suitable and customized services, using appropriate and targeted communication strategies.

A marketing approach, based on a systematic information collection about the potential users, and an appropriate market segmentation, could allow public bodies a more targeted, focused, effective, and efficient delivery of their services, and this would be advantageous not only for them but for the entire economy, in which they are supposed to play a significant role.

The immediate benefits produced by a market-oriented approach would be the following:

- easier identification of the market needs;
- smaller gap between demand and supply of internationalization services, thanks to a better configuration of these services in accordance with the market characteristics;
- better and more targeted communication to the potential users;
- better awareness of the characteristics of the various services, and broader and more effective use of these services;
- improved customer (SMEs) satisfaction.

Moreover, our study contributes to the existing literature proposing an application of the marketing segmentation approach with both objective and subjective criteria, identifying 3 different archetypes of Southern Italy SMEs, and suggesting for each of them a different set of services.

The main limitations of our study are specifically related to the characteristics of the chosen sample: beyond its limited size (111 SMEs), the participating firms were geographically based in few regions (Southern Italy), and had already expressed some sort of interest in internationalization and the related services, since they were already involved in a program promoted by the public body. Further research endeavors in this area should target a broader population of firms, i.e. including those without any experience or prejudice (either positive or negative) in the use of this type of services, and observe also the effectiveness of these services through an ex post survey. These improvements could allow a more in-depth analysis of the demand and a more exhaustive market segmentation and evaluation of

the suppliers' characteristics. The study represents just the first step for an in-depth analysis of a larger set of data and, in perspective, for a dynamic and longitudinal analysis based on an appropriate information system directly managed by public bodies, that could monitor SMEs' behavior and performance over time, in order to boost the effectiveness of the services that could support their internationalization.

*Giorgio Gandellini  
Università degli Studi Roma Tre  
giorgio.gandellini@uniroma3.it  
giorgio.gandellini@gmail.com*

*Giulia Tatananni Messaggio  
Università degli Studi Roma Tre  
giulia.tatananni@gmail.com*

## **Riassunto**

Nonostante gli abbondanti suggerimenti presenti in letteratura in merito alla necessità di adottare un approccio di marketing nell'erogazione dei servizi di supporto all'internazionalizzazione alle PMI, le principali organizzazioni pubbliche che hanno l'obiettivo di aiutare le imprese nel loro tentativo di internazionalizzazione non rispettano tali linee guida. Ciò ha un impatto negativo in termini di efficacia ed efficienza dei servizi di supporto

Il progetto di ricerca, sintetizzato nel paper, si è basato su una analisi cluster relativa a 111 PMI del sud Italia che ha permesso l'identificazione di 3 segmenti di imprese, diversi in termini di livello di coinvolgimento e preparazione all'internazionalizzazione e con differenti bisogni in termini di servizi di supporto all'internazionalizzazione. Sulla base delle caratteristiche e dei bisogni di ogni segmento, è possibile suggerire servizi di supporto più appropriati. Lo studio contribuisce all'attuale letteratura proponendo un'analisi empirica a sostegno delle teorie che suggeriscono la necessità di un maggiore allineamento tra offerta e domanda di servizi di supporto. Inoltre il lavoro suggerisce agli enti pubblici un approccio più orientato al mercato per supportare in maniera più efficace i processi di internazionalizzazione delle PMI.



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