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Do Chambers of Commerce have an added value in the web 2.0 era? Commercial missions by the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce as an internationalisation tool for Catalan firms in a digital world

Abstract

This study goes through the history of Chambers of Commerce, analysing some of the reasons for their appearance as well as their role throughout time. It moves forward to analyse the history and development of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce (BCC), founded in 1886.

Emphasis on the international department of the BCC is made to evaluate whether the Internet and the web 2.0 era have jeopardised the internationalisation services offered to Catalan firms. Through five case studies of firms having participated in commercial missions of the BCC, the strategic added values of this service are analysed. The study concludes that the differential traits and added values are: the status of public law entity, the built-in worldwide chamber network, the affordable price, and the direct channel with governmental entities to obtain subsidies for Catalan firms.

Keywords: Chambers of Commerce; Barcelona Chamber of Commerce; Internationalisation; International Department; Commercial Mission; Added Value, Internet; Web 2.0

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Introduction¹

Chambers of Commerce are entities present in almost any country of the world that have been offering services to firms for centuries. Nowadays, they tend to be government partners, since their activities are beneficial to the whole business community. Nevertheless, the main financing instrument for Chambers in Spain and Catalonia -the so-called *recurs cameral* or compulsory membership fee- was eliminated in 2011 by the Spanish Government.² This manoeuvre seemed to question the Chambers' usefulness in the contemporary world.

Parallel to this, the web 2.0, which implies the rise of the Internet as a reliable source of information and as an alternative to physical presence, seems to put under threat the role of business specialist that Chambers have undertaken so far, especially in the field of internationalisation.

The aim of this paper is to find out what the main added values are of the internationalisation services by Chambers of Commerce in the 2.0 society. Due to the vastness of the topic, this work will focus on the International Department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, to which 2,400 firms hired internationalisation services in 2015.³

The work is divided into two areas, the first one covering the history and evolution of Chambers of Commerce and the Chamber of Barcelona and the second one analysing five case studies of firms having hired commercial missions, the main internationalisation service of the Barcelona

¹ This paper is a revised version of the original dissertation "Do Chambers of Commerce have an added value in the 2.0 era?" by Minerva Estruch fully digitalised by the University of Barcelona in August 2017. This version has been proof-read by Anthony Nicholson in August 2018.

² Àlvarez, D., "Les cambres negocien amb Economia un nou sistema de Finançament," *La Vanguardia*, (July 16, 2012, 44). Economy Section.

³ Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona. (2015). *Memòria d'activitats*. Barcelona: Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona.

Chamber of Commerce, in order to identify the strengths of this service and its usefulness in the Internet era.

The hypotheses are:

Hypothesis 1. The status of public law entity and the role of defence of the business interest of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, which induces trust among firms, is regarded as value-added by firms hiring their international services.

Hypothesis 2. The built-in worldwide chamber network, which implies a net of experts, homologous entities abroad is regarded as value-added by firms hiring CCB international services.

Hypothesis 3. The price, lower than market equivalents, is regarded as value-added for firms hiring international services.

Hypothesis 4. The direct channel that the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona has with governmental entities for obtaining subsidies to help finance firms' commercial missions, is regarded as value-added by firms hiring international services.

General history of Chambers of Commerce

The first Chamber of Commerce was founded in Marseille in 1599.⁴ Although it had a precursory role, it was an isolated case. It was not until the end of the 18th century that Chambers of Commerce started appearing in both sides of the Atlantic -mainly north America and the United Kingdom- in a generalised way.⁵ Later on, throughout the 19th century Chambers of Commerce spread to other regions including Catalonia and Spain.

⁴ Lee M. Friedman. *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*. Vol. 21, 5 (Nov., 1947, 137-143)

⁵ Chamberme. *History of Chambers of Commerce*. Consulted April 2018

At the beginning, the phenomena of Chambers of Commerce followed a clear and logical pattern. Such business associations appeared mainly in coastal cities or cities with large populations⁶ since they were home to a port or concentrated a great amount of businesses and exchanges.

Chambers emerged as entities outside the governmental spectrum to exert business interest representation through petitions and memorials.⁷ The Chambers' bundle of services grew rapidly. Apart from voicing interests, they also offered information through publications, commercial arbitration, reading rooms and services to promote local business nationally and internationally.⁸

Nowadays, Chambers have become government partners as providers of business support services such as training courses to unemployed, business training or management of public funds⁹. Despite this government-chamber cooperation, which started between 1917-37 and became generalised in the 80s, Chambers maintain a certain level of autonomy and political non-alignment.

In terms of status Chambers follow two main models.¹⁰ In the continental model, chambers are considered public law entities and are therefore governed by public law. In such cases, membership tends to be compulsory for firms under the geographical scope of the chamber. On the other hand, there is the Anglo-Saxon model where chambers are considered private business associations and are ruled by private law. Membership is, therefore, voluntary.

⁶ Boston (1785), New York (1786), Charleston (1773), Liverpool (1774), Jersey (1768)

⁷ Bennett, R. (2012). *Born Out of Anger: A History of Chambers* [Recorded by Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives]. USA.

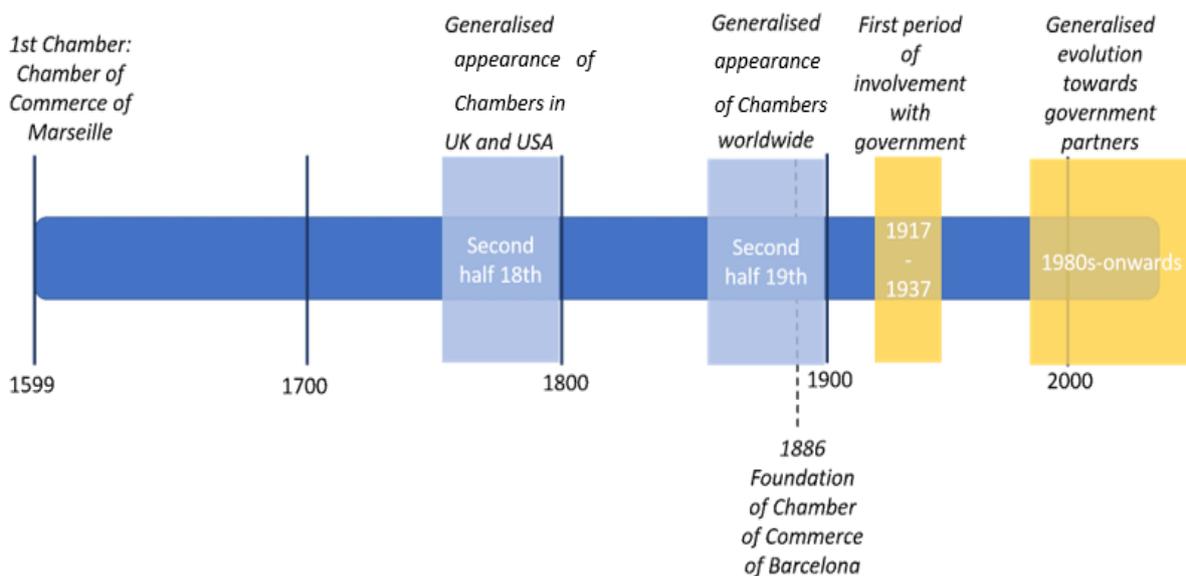
⁸ Federation of Belgian Chambers of Commerce. *About Chambers of Commerce*. Consulted April 2018.

⁹ See figure *Percentage of chambers offering a given service at each time*, Robert Bennett, 2012

¹⁰ International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). *History of the Chamber movement*. Consulted April 2018.

There are parallelisms in terms of funding in both models. The resources underpinning the early Chambers were mainly obtained through subscriptions but shifted progressively to include users' fees and after the 70s and 80s were supplemented by government contracts.

Figure 1. Summarised timeline of main periods on history of Chambers of Commerce.



Source: Own elaboration

History of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce

In Spain Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation were created on 9th April 1886 according to a Royal Decree signed by the Queen Maria Cristina.¹¹ Chambers would be politically non-aligned institutions representing economic interests of cities having a port or relevant commercial activity.

¹¹ BOE. Real Decreto de 9 de abril de 1886.

Manuel Girona, founder of the Bank of Barcelona, was elected first president of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Barcelona in 1886 which started off with few resources, few members, and a low degree of responsibility. It is said that the Chamber of Barcelona was kept alive because it was the successor of the *Junta de Comerç* (The Board of Trade) a historical and highly respected entity that disappeared in 1847.

When it was founded, the membership was voluntary, members were scarce and therefore revenues low. These facts, together with the death of the charismatic Manuel Girona in 1901 and the lack of cooperation with the central government, which seemed to ignore chamber's willingness to cooperate, caused a decline in members and an anaemic and pitiful life for the corporation, as Salvador Poggio, member of the navigation section stated.¹²

Table 1. Table summarising membership and collected annual fees for the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce.

Year	Members	Income from annual fees (in pesetas)
1886	336	4005
1887	378	8510
1888	331	8300
1889	303	8400
1890	220	6810
1891	290	8945
1892	291	8595
1893	259	9325
1894	223	10990
1895	220	9995
1896	207	9935
1897	192	9795
1898	202	10525
1899	256	10525
1900	239	11085

Source: From Cabana i Vancells (1994), "*La Cambra i els seus presidents*"

¹² Cabana i Vancells (1994).

In 1901, a Royal Decree¹³ was meant to reorganise Spanish Chambers, increasing their attributions and resources, allowing them to receive subsidies, issue certificates of origin or acquire real estate properties. Unfortunately, due to a government crisis, the degree never came into force. Thus, forcing the Chamber of Barcelona to issue a respectful complaint to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Public Works both in 1901 and 1903.¹⁴ Since the complaints did not have an effect, the activities of the Chamber of Barcelona during its first 20 years of existence were reduced to composing reports about economic topics and publishing a periodical magazine analysing national and international opportunities -called *Butlletí de la Cambra*.

Later, in 1911 the law of reorganisation of Chambers entered into force, introducing two major changes. First, Chambers of Industry would be separate entities from Chambers of Commerce, something that caused misunderstandings in terms of scope of action, and second two percent of the contributions paid by merchants and industrials would be devoted to Chambers, thus following the German and French model of obligatory participation.

The years that followed were somewhat unstable, going from Primo de Riveira (1923-1930) to Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) passing through the proclamation of the Second Republic (1930-1936) and the Civil War (1936-1939).

During Riveira's dictatorship the Chamber remained still, the protest reports became just lamentations with one exception published in 1926 in response to the Royal Order from 4th November 1926 by which no society could be constituted, nor its facilities enlarged without

¹³ BOE. Real Decreto del 21 de Junio de 1901.

¹⁴ *Butlletí* from the Chamber of Barcelona, April 1903.

authorisation. Such statement was an attempt against the economic liberalism for which the Catalan bourgeoisie had fought during the second half of the 19th century.

The second Republic was welcomed by the Chamber of Barcelona which stated that its services were at the orders of Francesc Macià. In its publication *La Industria Española* the Chamber of Industry cites that the Second Republic together with the *Estatut d'Autonomia* are great news for Catalonia.¹⁵ In addition, the first texts in Catalan are published. This situation led to a boycott campaign by Spain towards Catalan products.

The Generalitat de Catalunya, the Catalan government, took control of the Chamber of Barcelona during the Civil War as many of its responsible officers were not available to manage the entity. In a meeting organised in 1938 in San Sebastián -Franco ruled territory- the representatives of the Catalan Chambers had to declare the nullity of all the Acts dating from the republic period as they had been written at the service of an illegitimate service -Republican Catalonia. In addition, a staff depuration of non-like-minded workers was carried out.

During Franco's Dictatorship (1939-1975) Chambers in Spain were declared legitimate entities¹⁶ and had to vow loyalty to Franco's regime. Their tasks would be to keep register of export and imports, deliver certificates of origin, and keep track of the businesses in the economy.

Throughout the dictatorship we can highlight three main actions by the Chamber of Barcelona. The first were several electricity-related complaints that jeopardised industrial production. A complaint sent to the Ministry of Public Works in 1952 denouncing the alarming delay in the electrification -planned in 1946 but still not real in 1952- of the railway connecting Maçanet

¹⁵ Literally: "momento de júbilo para Cataluña"

¹⁶ Ley de jefatura del Estado from 9th March 1939.

and Portbou and, therefore, Europe. Furthermore, there were electricity restrictions taking place in Catalonia for which more favourable timetables were attained thanks to the Chamber's negotiations. Finally, since hydraulic energy was not enough, the State distributed coal and oil throughout the Spanish Territory. However, Catalonia did not receive a proportional amount of resources considering it agglomerated 40% of the economic potential of the State. Thanks to a reclamation signed by the Chamber of Barcelona, CAMPSA settled an extraordinary share of 1000 litres of oil to Barcelona.

The second major role played by the Chamber was as organiser of the *Fira de Mostres* (Trade Fair) which allowed some Catalan firms to make brief contact with firms from abroad and acquire the urgently needed equipment from foreign sales stands. Organising such an ambitious fair was a courageous action considering that Spain was in a Post-war environment and other European countries were involved in the World War II.

The third notable contribution of the Chamber during the Dictatorship was the creation of the Common Market Committee in 1959 to ask for a liberalisation for commercial exchanges and the convertibility of the peseta. Overall, the Chamber proposed measures to integrate Spain in the Common European Market.

A short time later, in 1967, the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Industry were unified by unanimity thanks to the boosting of Felix Escala and became again the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation.

After Franco's death in 1975 the Chamber of Commerce stated in a publication that a new era was about to start. And so it did. Josep Maria Figueres was elected president of the Chamber of Barcelona, becoming the first president of the institution who was not from the Catalan bourgeoisie. Also, in 1980 the Economic Report of Catalonia was published in Catalan for the

first time in history. Lastly, in 1986 Spain entered the Economic European Community and the Chamber gathered the momentum to increase its array of services notably regarding foreign trade, thus offering certificates of origin, studies of foreign markets, consultancy services and commercial missions to attractive destinations.

The Chamber of Barcelona was co-financed by service fees and by a percentage funding that came from business taxes collected by the government since 1911, thus following the continental model. In Catalonia and Spain, a percentage of the corporate tax is aimed at Chamber activities and it is called *quota* or *recurs cameral*.¹⁷ This source of revenue lowered with the crisis, since only firms with positive profits were paying it.¹⁸

In addition to that, in 2011 the Royal Decree-Law 13/2010^{19,20} entered into force by which the *quota cameral* was removed and membership became voluntary which meant that Chambers saw their main revenue source and survival threatened.

Due to this modification in the basic financing rules, now Spanish Chambers can only cover 30% of their activities thanks to the membership fees, compared to the more than 70% before the restructuring.²¹

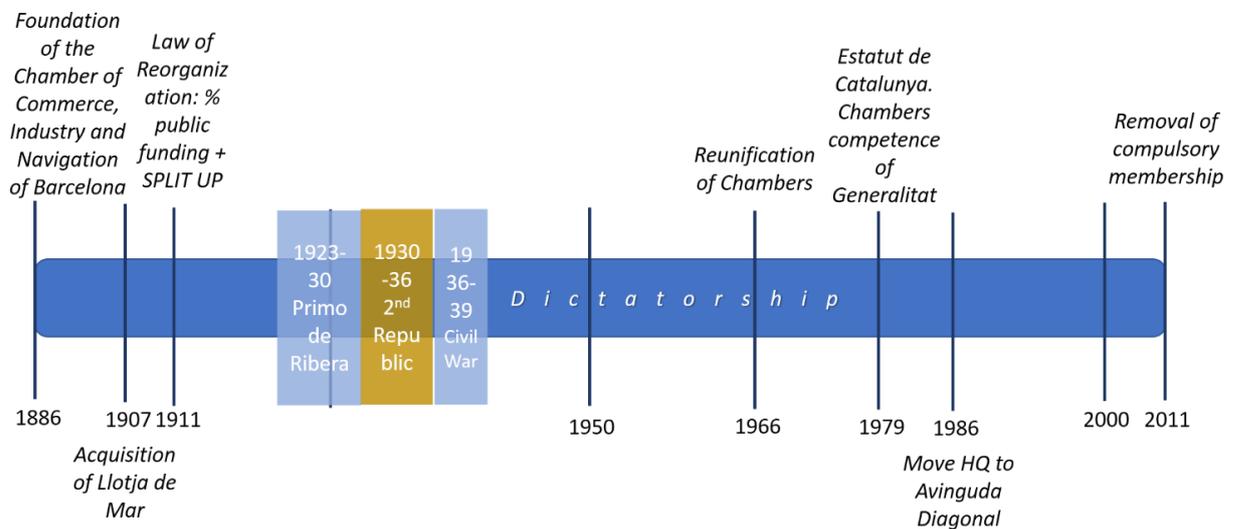
¹⁷ Compulsory membership fee. No english literal translation is found in literature since in Anglo-Saxon countries membership has never been compulsory.

¹⁸ Chambers of Commerce in Spain have always collected the membership fees corresponding to two years earlier. In 2008, they collected the revenues from 2006 that accounted for a total of €283 million. In 2011, they collected the revenues from 2009, which had decreased to €191 million.

¹⁹ Boletín Oficial del Estado

²⁰ Literally: “La reforma hace voluntaria la pertenencia a las Cámaras y la contribución a la ahora denominada cuota cameral. Su eliminación liberará de recursos [...] a dos millones y medio de empresas activas en el mercado [...]. La voluntariedad de la pertenencia a la Cámaras debe ser un incentivo para que cumplan sus funciones con mayor eficiencia[...]. Real Decreto-Ley 13/2010 from the 3rd December.

²¹ Díaz-Varela, M. *Les cambres negocien amb Economia cofinançar els seus serveis a pimes*. La Vanguardia, (August 1, 2011, 53).

Figure 2. Timeline of relevant events for the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona

Source: Own elaboration.

Era 2.0

One of the main roles of Chambers of Commerce is helping SMEs to internationalise or start their exporting activities. Chambers initially did so by providing information and reports about foreign markets that were otherwise out of reach. Nowadays, Chambers still aim to promote national firms abroad. Nevertheless, the society in which they operate has radically changed. Information about foreign markets that once was only available to a few institutions, is now at the reach of everybody and just a click away using the Internet to which everybody can have access. The situation in which information online is complemented and enriched by other users' comments has been called *crowdsourcing*²², a phenomenon belonging to the Web 2.0²³ revolution.

²² The concept of crowdsourcing is used to describe a process whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators is used to undertake tasks that were once preserve of a few specialist. (Howe 2006)

²³ Web 2.0 is an expression that was first used and popularised by the editorial group O'Reilly Media in a conference in 2004. It has been widely used since 2006.

There are several studies that prove that the Internet has revealed new paths for exporters to access foreign markets particularly for SMEs (Sinkovics, Sinkovics, and Ruey-Jer 2013; Bell and Loane 2010). The benefits of the Internet as an internationalisation tool lie in the fact that Web access is available to all firms regardless of their economic resources. The fact that the Internet makes a firm instantly global reduces the importance of economies of scale, the marketing costs, improves contact opportunities, contact between buyers and sellers and, most importantly, changes intermediary relationships.²⁴

Throughout the centuries, it took time for firms to engage in international activities. They normally did so after mastering the local market²⁵ or as a resource to overcome a national decrease in demand. Nevertheless, in the Web 2.0 society, a growing number of firms engage in international activities since the beginning, these being called *born-global firms*.

The ease by which firms find, thanks to online tools, fewer barriers to access a foreign market may call into question the utility of the traditional international services of Chambers of Commerce.

In fact, as Howe (2006) stated, that *crowdsourcing* in the Web 2.0 whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators, is used to undertake tasks that were once preserved to a few specialists -such as Chambers.

In the following sections we will analyse what the added values are of the internationalising services offered by the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce in an era in which the role of the specialists is being called into question.

²⁴ (Chatell 1998); (Quelch and Klein 1996)

²⁵ Johanson, Jan and Vahlne, Jan-Erik, 1977. "The Internationalization Process of the Firm—A Model of Knowledge Development and Increasing Foreign Market Commitments," Journal of International Business Studies, Palgrave Macmillan; Academy of International Business, vol. 8 (1): 23-32, March. Also known as Uppsala Model.

International Department of the Chamber of Barcelona

To analyse the usefulness of Chambers of Commerce in the 2.0 society, and due to the abundance of such institutions worldwide and the wideness of their actions which make it impossible to analyse them entirely, this study focuses on the commercial missions carried out by the international department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, through an in-depth case study to test the four hypotheses of this dissertation.

The international activities of the chamber of Barcelona involve the internationalisation of firms, diplomacy and mediation, commercial missions abroad, customs reports, export support, market analysis and other such tools,²⁶ all under the responsibility of the International Department.

The service bringing in a greater percentage of revenues are commercial missions which are grouped business trips to countries showing major commercial potential for economic exchanges. Such missions are categorised geographically Latin-America, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and Europe. Over the past 10 years, the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona has carried out an average of 13.4 commercial missions annually,²⁷ the countries to which these missions are carried out vary according to the interest shown by firms and on the market attractiveness. The destinations of grouped missions also adapt to global economic events rather than following a regular pattern. For instance, throughout 2017, extraordinarily five commercial missions to Cuba were carried out, thus taking advantage of the historical moment of economic openness of the country, whose government is organising several trade fairs by sector to attract foreign investors.

²⁶ Retrieved from the Official Website of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona (www.cambrabcn.org) as well as from the official catalogue of services. (Cambra de Comerç de Barcelona, 2016)

²⁷ Own calculation with data retrieved from *Memòria d'Activitats de la Cambra de Barcelona* (2006-2015)

When a commercial mission is planned, the international department oversees the publication of the news both in the Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya- DOGC,²⁸ in the website of the Chamber of Barcelona²⁹ and in the unified website of the net of Catalan Chambers. Later, the marketing department continues the diffusion in social networks as well as with mass mailings to firms in Chamber's databases. Dates, cost of the service, objectives, target firms and potential subsidies are all detailed in the brochure and informative PDF.

Interested firms then reach out to the officer responsible for the mission, who organises individualized meetings to analyse the viability of the firms in the country where the mission is taking place as well as to better explain the functioning of the trips.

The inscription to the mission is confirmed by the firms after the payment and the filling-in of a form that details information of the firm's area of business, turnover, exportation, product characteristics, competence, to mention but a few.

After that, the international department sends out information about the participating firms to their interlocutors in the destination. Those interlocutors may be the Chambers of Commerce of the destination country, with which they have direct contact, independent consultancies, or delegations of ACCIÓ -the Catalan Agency of Competitiveness-. Guided by explanations on the ideal customers and typology of contacts that firms want to find in a market, the preparation of a working agenda starts.

When the mission takes place, the representatives of the firms fly together with the expert designated by the Chamber to the country. Previously, each firm has been handed a detailed

²⁸ Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya

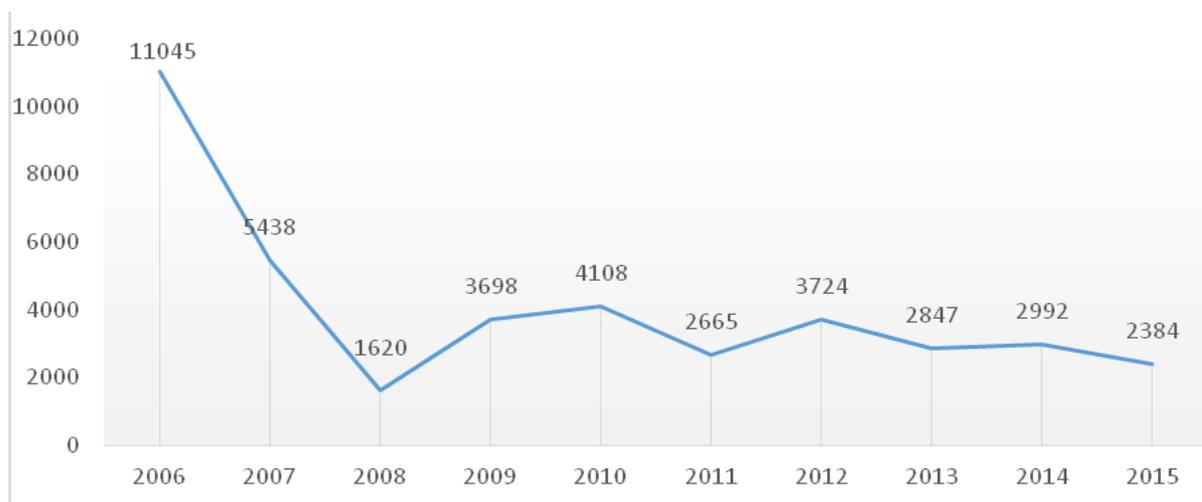
²⁹ Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona, (2017). Cambra Barcelona. Doing Business. Retrieved 2017, from <http://www.cambrabcn.org/>

plan of the meetings arranged for them. Those meetings will take place during the days of the trip.

In the following figure, we can see the number of firms hiring any of the international department services in the Chamber of Barcelona during the period from 2006 to 2015. The peak in 2006 may be attributed to a different method of counting that did not avoid duplications. Later, the figures seem to stabilize with difficulties that can be associated to both economic and financial factors.

The decrease in 2008 can be associated to the financial crisis that hit almost all kinds of enterprises but had a devastating effect on SMEs which tend to be the target firms for international department services in the Chamber of Barcelona. Seeing their revenues decrease, fewer firms hired international services.

Figure 3. Number of firms contracting services to the international department of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce.



Source: Own elaboration with data collected from *Memòria d'Activitats de la Cambra de Barcelona 2006-2015*

The decrease in 2011 was caused by the removal of the compulsory membership in 2010, due to which the Chambers suffered a dramatic decrease in revenues and were forced to increase their service prices and decrease their bundle of offers, which deterred firms from hiring them.

Ever since the removal of the so-called *quota* or *recurs cameral*, the number of firms hiring international services from the Chamber of Barcelona has remained low compared to previous years. This fact is an evidence that allows us to state that one of the differential features of Chamber services is the affordability of good quality services.

Added value

To test the hypotheses, knowledge acquired during my internship in the international department together with public writings, laws, regulations, and official material from Chambers of Commerce will be used.

Corporate websites and promotion material from the Chamber of Spain, the Chamber of Barcelona and the International Department will be analysed to find out which differential traits are highlighted when promoting their services. Conversations with experts from the international and marketing department of the Chamber of Barcelona will be considered.

The testimony of the Chamber clients: case studies

To have an external perspective, several firms having hired services to the international department will be interviewed to analyse the reasons that pushed them to work together with the Chamber of Commerce, which values they consider more relevant and to discover what role the Internet plays in their internationalisation process. Some of the firms interviewed were suggested internally by Chamber experts. Other firms were contacted using public information available online.

The five interviewed representatives³⁰ belong to Catalan firms that hired an international mission with the chamber of Barcelona. The firms belong to different sectors, are at different stages of the business cycle and some have an international department and others do not. These are the interviewed representatives organised in chronological order of interviews.

ROK DESIGN – Antón García – Commercial mission to Saudi Arabia 2016

Antón García is the founder of ROK DESIGN a firm specialized in the design of spaces, more specifically in the domain of industrial design. The firm was founded in 2012 in Barcelona; although the founder comes from Galicia where he started his studies of industrial engineering, which he complemented with a specialized Master's Degree in urban furniture design in Barcelona.

In the search of growth possibilities, Antón García, contacted the Chamber of Commerce to receive advice on how he could expand his business. From the Chamber of Barcelona, he was redirected to the international department which suggested joining the commercial mission to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, although specifically concentrating on Saudi Arabia. That was in 2016. Being a start-up made him trust a public entity rather than a private one and look for affordable services.

Although ROK DESIGN had already had several international sales, most them were reactive sales of specific contacts made in trade fairs or by word-of-mouth. In general terms, it can be stated that the mission to Saudi Arabia was the first active action undertaken to find international customers.

³⁰ García, Antón, CEO RokDesign Barcelona, (April 2017).

Gelado, Mireia, Export Manager of J. Vilaseca Barcelona, (April 2017).

Massés, Helena, Export Manager of Gorgy Timing Spain Barcelona, (April 2017).

Rodríguez, Rafael, Founder of Freeway Logistics Barcelona, (April 2017).

Vidal, Marta, Export Manager for Telic Group Barcelona, (April 2017).

All interviewees were contacted by Minerva Estruch-Rectoret and have given permission to appear in this work.

TELIC GROUP – Marta Vidal – Commercial mission to Morocco and Algeria 2015

Marta Vidal is the export manager of Telic Group, a firm from the hospital sector. They commercialise several product lines for pharmacies, sports people, and physiotherapists. Nevertheless, 90% of their turnover comes from hospital material. They have been exporting for 25 years and have sales to 70 countries. Therefore, they are used to travelling and organising commercial missions on their own.

Their main criteria when hiring the commercial mission to Morocco and Algeria with the Chamber in 2015 was that the dates fitted in perfectly with their internal calendar, in which they have already-planned trips that cannot be avoided.

GORGY TIMING – Helena Massés – Commercial mission to Mexico 2016

Helena Massés is the export manager from the Spanish division of Gorgy Timing³¹ a French firm that employs 45 people in Catalonia and that commercialises tools for time measurement in the industrial sector. Among their products we can find both analogical and digital clocks for industrial use, time servers, electronic screens and almost anything has to do with time measurement to be applied in factories and industries in a wide range of sectors.

Since the French parent company had already used several internationalisation services from French Chambers of Commerce and Embassies, they decided to look for equivalent institutions in Catalonia.

³¹ Gorgy Timing. (n.d.). *Gorgy Timing Corporate Website*. Retrieved April 2017, from <http://www.gorgy-timing.es>

J. VILASECA – Mireia Gelado – Commercial mission to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait 2016

Mireia Gelada, export manager for J. Vilaseca, a paper factory established in Catalonia since 1714 specialised in manufacturing of paper products aimed at the stamping markets, advertising, security, labelling, to mention but a few.

J-Vilaseca had participated in missions to Kazakhstan, Romania and Egypt organised by the Chamber. In the specific case of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the support was needed as it is a very complex market both culturally and economically. There are difficulties in obtaining the visas and women are deprived from freedom in many areas. That is the main reason the mission was appreciated and hired by J. VILASECA.

FREEWAY LOGISTICS – Rafael Rodríguez – Commercial mission to Mexico 2016

Rafael Rodríguez is the founder of Freeway Logistics, a firm created in 2009 by professionals from different sectors of logistics and transportation. Their business activity is to act as a global logistics operator, so, advising their customers on services and transportation means better suiting their needs.

Normally they make do with the contacts in an independent forwarders' network to cover Asia and Middle East. However, their resources do not cover the markets of Latin America. That is why they decided to hire the commercial mission to Mexico with the Chamber in 2016.

Public law entity

Hypothesis 1 (H1) reads: The status of public law entity and defence of the general interest of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, which induces trust among firms, is regarded as an added value by firms hiring international services.

Formal approach

It needs to be analysed whether the affirmation is true according to objective documents. On the one hand, laws regulating Chambers are considered to see how Chambers are defined in official texts. Secondly, corporate documents and promotion material belonging to the Chamber are analysed to see how they introduce themselves to firms and to value whether they consider their own status to be a value-added.

Literature on the topic

Literature on the topic recognises that, at least in the beginning, there was a characteristic trust behind Chambers that implied low-risk (Vidal Olivares 2010)³² First, because the advisor was not trying to make money out of it as a market service and secondly because the service maintained an autonomy, meaning that it was carried out voluntarily and in the willingness to help the whole business community (Bennet 2011).

Official public writings

In the public texts³³ regulating Chambers in Catalonia, Chambers of commerce are corporations of public law, which maintaining a political non-alignment, are under the scope of the Government, which has legislative competence over them. Chambers of Commerce are consultation bodies of the public administration and have their own legal status. Chambers also have autonomy and independence to manage their monetary resources as well as the bundle of services they offer.

By law, in Catalonia there needs to be at least one Chamber in each province (Girona, Lleida, Tarragona) and two in the province of Barcelona. In addition, in each province there can be

³² Literally: “Las Cámaras constituyeron [...] plataformas de confianza, disminuyendo los riesgos de los comerciantes e inversores españoles”

³³ Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

other delegations belonging to the main Chamber. Each Chamber has a geographical scope, to which firms are subscribed depending on their constitution address.

As far as the promotion of the internationalisation is concerned, each Chamber is free to offer the services it considers appropriate to fulfil the goal. As seen before, commercial missions are one of the main tools by which Chambers help Catalan firms go abroad.

Chambers corporate presentation

From the Chamber of Barcelona perspective, we consider that corporate websites and catalogues and videos are the showcase for their services.

In a corporate video concerning the whole entity³⁴, they define themselves as trustful because the Chamber represents all kinds of businesses; from self-employed, small business owners, medium-sized businesses to large corporations. The Chamber offers services to all sorts of businesses regardless of type, size, or sector; since 1886 they have been working for the defence of the business activity.

Somehow, Chambers must offer their services to any kind of firm without discrimination due to their type. Hence, the potential profitability of the business hiring the service is not relevant. The Chamber offers a neutral position that consultancies, private firms, or banks that may offer similar services cannot offer because of their private nature, which forces them to have profit-making as the main goal. This means that firms that would probably be rejected by private entities due to low-return on investment can be assisted by the Chamber of Commerce.

³⁴ Cambra de Barcelona. (2016, March 29). Barcelona Chamber of Commerce 2016. Retrieved April 2017, from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9CrkChFyVA>

Empirical approach

Four out the five firms to which the follow-up was carried out state that the status of public law entity of the Chamber conveys a message of trust. Only one of the firms states that the relevant matter is that dates of the mission match with their firm's agenda, regardless of who organises it.

Some state that they feel -as a firm- automatically represented by the Chamber of Commerce because they know it is the entity defending business activity in their geographical scope.

Firms value the neutrality of the Chamber's status. Years of experience as a historical entity - since 1886- is also considered relevant. The fact that the Chamber is partner to the public administration is also considered a characteristic that helps convey the message of trustworthiness.

One of the firms mentions how private consultancies are too profit-oriented and selling their service is the only thing that matters and, in addition, may sell the firm's data to third parties, something they understand the Chamber will not do because of their status.

In line with this, some highlight that they value how, thanks to being a public law entity, the Chamber provides help and services to firms that have less guarantees of success (lower ROI) or to not-yet-profitable start-ups that would not find support in the private sector.

As stated by several interviewees, when firms seek help to develop their business activity, and this includes internationalising, the first thing they do is to consult public entities that offer a service that may help them in a less profit-oriented way than private consultancies. This is why they consider essential the fact that the chamber is labelled as a public law entity that defends the general business interest regardless of the type, size, or turnover.

Only one of the interviewees questions whether the proposal of participating in a mission was suitable for its firm and to what extent it was only sold as a business opportunity for the Chamber. Being aware that commercial missions are useful when you have a clear decision of which market to go for. If you are not sure about it, the Chamber may advise enrolling in a mission and this might not be the appropriate market for the firm, states the interviewee.

In general firms value the positioning of respect that its status provides, they would rather hire services to an institution than to a firm such a consultancy.

Therefore, we can state that hypothesis 1 is supported both formally and empirically. Firms hiring commercial missions in the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona regard the status of public law entity as value-added.

Worldwide network

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The built-in worldwide chamber network, which implies a net of experts, homologous entities abroad is regarded as value-added by firms hiring international services.

Formal approach

Official public writings

The government tries to encourage Chambers to build up a network of contacts both at regional, national, and international level. From the Catalan government, we see that *Article 14 of the Law 14/2002* about Chambers in Catalonia considers that it is important that chambers establish agreements with other institutions in order to better fulfil their goals and activities.

Therefore, by law³⁵, Chambers are allowed and encouraged to establish cooperation agreements with other Chambers and also with private and public institutions in the national territory and

³⁵ Article 14. Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

also abroad.³⁶ In addition of contacts and networks Chambers may build with other entities nationally and internationally, they may also decide to create their own delegations abroad. Chambers are considered social networks that contribute to the decrease of transaction costs (Vidal Olivares 2010)

This is covered by the *Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23rd July* which modifies the *Royal Decree 786/1979 of 16th March* which establishes the rules for Spanish Chambers of Commerce established abroad. Basically, the modification mentions that the creation of Spanish Chambers abroad will be made easier in order to respond to the growing number of Spanish of firms wanting to internationalise and in need of this service.

The original Decree recognises the work carried out by Spanish Chambers abroad in paving the way for Spanish exports to increase. Furthermore, it highlights the collaborations there have been between Spanish Chambers and Spanish Embassies. The Decree emphasizes that cooperation is important between national Chambers and their international representations; being advised with a coordination plan on issues of general interest.

International delegations of Spanish Chambers are in charge of providing general commercial information to interested Spanish firms, promote Spanish products abroad, assist Spanish exporters, intervene in solving international disputes through mediation, and issue of certificates of origin, to mention but a few.

Chambers' corporate presentation

At a Corporate level, we can show how the network of contacts of Chambers of Commerce is a relevant characteristic by analysing official promotional material and websites.

³⁶ Literally: "Per complir millor llurs finalitats, les cambres poden establir convenis o altres instruments de col·laboració entre elles [...] amb les administracions públiques i amb altres ens públics o privats d'àmbit nacional o internacional."

Starting at a Spanish level: The Chamber of Spain declares on its website that it counts on a Global Network formed by 180 offices in over 31 countries for the convenience of firms hiring their services. In fact, in Spain alone, there are 86 chambers of commerce that maintain relationships among them. There are also 47 local offices in Spain to overcome distances by acting as a network of Local Economic Observatories. Plus, there are 35 Chambers of Commerce Abroad (CAMACOES), regulated by the mentioned Royal Decree.³⁷

At a Catalan level, the entity managing the group of chambers in the territory is the so-called *Consell de Cambres de Catalunya*. We do not have direct information about the entities with which they have agreements abroad but in their corporate web there is a map summarising all the commercial missions that Catalan Chambers organise.

As we mentioned in a previous chapter, organising a commercial mission means that there is an interlocutor in the country where it is carried out, who organises the agenda of firms. Therefore, we can consider the map of commercial missions of Catalan Chambers clear evidence proving the network of contacts Chambers have abroad³⁸ which include missions to North, Central and South America, Europe, Middle East, Northern Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Oceania.

Lastly, at a local level, the Chamber of Barcelona states in its corporate video (Cambra de Barcelona, 2016) that Chambers of Commerce comprise a worldwide network operating in 130 countries, with the Chamber of Barcelona playing an active and important role. They claim to maintain exchanges and have agreements with other Chambers, firms, and key institutions at an international, national, and regional level.

³⁷ See map of Delegations of Spanish Chambers abroad at www.camara.es

³⁸ See map of Countries to which commercial missions by Catalan Chambers are carried out at www.paicambres.org

One of the interlocutors at destination for the Catalan Chambers is the entity of ACCIÓ, belonging to the Generalitat de Catalunya and labelled as Agency for Competitiveness. We can see in its website a display of its 36 delegations abroad; whose function is to promote Catalan business internationally and attract foreign investment to Catalonia.³⁹

Empirical approach

All the interviewees consider the global chamber network to be an added value. One of the facts they value unanimously is that the Chamber has interlocutors that are physically at the destination. They find this a key strength and an essential characteristic that allows them to create high quality agendas.

Some interviewees underline how you can go much further in negotiations to set up a meeting when the Chamber does it on your behalf. Speaking on behalf of the chamber of commerce, not only opens doors to contact their homologous entities abroad but also private firms which may be a firm's potential client. This fact may be linked to the previous hypothesis. As one of the interviewees states that being a public entity makes it easier to be listened to, both at public and private level, as the figure of Chamber of Commerce has equivalents worldwide.

One of the firms underlines, specifically, how delegates at destination working for the Chamber of Barcelona are much more qualified than those working for ICEX, a public entity with which they hired a mission in the past.

Apart from valuing the usefulness of delegates abroad and the network of contacts they can establish, responsible for the firms interviewed also find interesting the fact of having access to contacts inside the Chamber of Barcelona itself. This type of networking helps them to have somebody they can refer to when in need in the future.

³⁹ See map of Delegations of ACCIÓ at www.gencat.cat/accio

In fact, several firms stated that they do not consider it essential for the Chamber to carry a post-follow-up of the mission, as this seems to be internal task for the firm. What they do highly value is that the representative of the Chamber of Barcelona who accompanied them to the mission, continues to be available and easily reachable when the mission ends.

They also find it relevant to be able to talk with the delegate at destination and carry-out an interactive preparation of agendas. Visiting physically, when in the mission, the offices where those delegates work is also regarded positively; as well as the visits or interviews they may carry out with the Embassy or the country's Chamber of Commerce.

The physical presence in the country where the agenda is carried out is essential for arranging quality meetings. However, some of the interviewees state that not all of the contacts were the perfect profile of customer they wanted. Also, that the contacts of the Chambers can very effectively arrange the meetings but that, as it is comprehensible, success is not ensured.

Normally, the meetings are useful to establish a first contact to which the follow up will be done in a virtual way. It is rare that agreements are closed in the first visit. Nevertheless, this first visit seems to be essential to show interest and contact and orders are later organised via email without problem.

In general, representatives interviewed value the network the Chamber has abroad, especially the physical presence of delegates of cooperative entities in countries and being able to exchange ideas with those representatives to build up a good planning of interviews appropriate to the needs of the firm.

Also, they are glad to have contacts inside the Chamber of Barcelona once the mission finishes and to have access to future services of the Chamber. Some state that after participating in the

mission with the Chamber they discovered many other services of the Chamber itself and of complementary entities such as Foment (the main employers' association of Catalonia).

Public law both at Spanish and Catalan level has been analysed to prove how institutions allow and encourage the creation of a global chamber network. Also, the geographical dispersion of delegates belonging to the Chamber of Spain, Chamber of Barcelona and Acció has contributed to visualise the international reach of the network. Parallel to this, firms agree unanimously that the network and contacts the chamber has access to, was a decisive in justifying their purchase decision.

Hence, we can state that *H2* is supported both formally and empirically and that the global network of contacts the Chamber has access to is value-added for the international department.

Affordable prices

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The price, lower than market equivalents, is regarded as an added value for firms hiring international services.

Official public writings

According to the Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23rd July, Chambers of Commerce receive subsidies assigned by the Government so as to encourage the promotion of services that serve the general business interest.

Moreover, in article 19 of the same Decree⁴⁰, where sources of financing for Chambers of commerce are listed, subsidies of the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism are considered the third source of income.

⁴⁰ Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23rd of July

This economic help are sunk investments made by the government that help decrease the market price of the services Chambers offer and therefore make them more affordable to SMEs, the main customer for internationalisation services.

Chambers corporate presentation

The Chamber of Barcelona is aware that affordable prices is an attractive characteristic of their services. In fact, in their corporate video, they state that the Chamber of Barcelona works to offer affordable and quality services.⁴¹

Prices for commercial missions with the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona vary according to the market but are normally around €1,350+VAT, €550 being the enrolment fee and €800 the cost of the preparation of the working agenda and meeting plan. Final prices end up being around €1,630, including VAT. This price includes meetings with the person responsible for the market in the Chamber of Barcelona, individualised agenda, contact and feedback from interlocutors at destination, logistic support, and post mission follow-up.

There are market equivalents organised by other entities and sector associations such as CECOT or ACCiÓ itself, all of them tend to be equivalent in terms of price. In the private market, however, prices are much higher as commercial missions tend to be individual and receive no public funding.

Empirical approach

Four out of the five interviewed firms find the affordable price a defining characteristic for hiring the mission. There was one firm that stated that dates were more relevant than price when hiring a commercial mission.

⁴¹ Cambra de Barcelona. (2017, April 10). Internacionalitza't amb Cambra de Barcelona. Retrieved April 2017, from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjgWXqcSU5o>

Among the other four firms there was unanimity in declaring that the service had a very competitive price. The firms with international experience valued how cost-effective the service was and how it helped them externalise the activity of agenda planning in a very time-saving way. On the other side of the spectrum, the start-up interviewed and firms with no export department mentioned how they knew they could count on the Chamber for a service that they could not afford in the private sector.

Hence, medium-sized firms with an export department consider the price lower than the cost of doing the same work internally; while firms with no export department value consider they could not have had access to that service otherwise.

Also, one of the interviewees states that she knows market equivalents in the private sector are much more expensive, since she used a consultancy just for advice on international issues and the price was greater than what the Chamber charges for commercial missions abroad, which implies an active and personalised research.

The Spanish law regulating Chambers of Commerce regulates the allocation of subsidies to Chamber in order to encourage them to provide affordable services. In addition, the Chamber uses this strength when promoting their services. Empirically, four out of the five firms state how the affordable price was an issue of paramount importance when hiring the service.

Hence, we can state that *H3* is supported both formally and empirically and that the affordable prices of the commercial missions are an added value for firms hiring international services.

Direct Channel for subsidies

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The direct channel that the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona has for obtaining subsidies to help finance firms' commercial missions, is regarded as value-added by firms hiring international services.

*Formal approach**Official public writings*

According to the Catalan law regulating Chambers,⁴² they are assigned the role of managing subsidies and public funds aimed at firms to foster their activities. Basically, the Catalan government identifies the Chamber as an official intermediary to channel subsidies towards firms.

Chambers corporate presentation

At a Spanish level, the Chamber of Commerce of Spain publishes on its corporate website how they have the legal role to manage European structural funds, as they are the intermediary that channels European funds towards Spanish SMEs. Most of the programmes they manage are grouped in the European Regional Development Fund⁴³ which aims to pave the way for internationalisation to take place and to promote technological development.

In fact, on their corporate site they number the programmes that Chambers are legally entitled to manage during the period from 2014 to 2020, these being: Programa Operativo de Crecimiento Inteligente, InnoCámaras, Support to Eco-innovation for SMEs, TICCámaras, Fomento de la eAdministración en la Pyme, Plan Integral de apoyo a la competitividad del comercio minorista en España, Tourism Programme, Xpande, Xpande Digital, International Promotion Programme, Business support programme to women, Formación profesional dual, España Emprende, Support the entrepreneurial spirit.

⁴² Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

⁴³ European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

At a regional level, the Council of Catalan Chambers also states how they are responsible for managing the Enterprise Europe Network which involves a series of opportunities and services, ranging from open source databases, to subsidies to promote competitiveness.

Lastly, at a local level, in the official website of the Chamber of Barcelona, the posts promoting each of the missions contain information about the subsidy the Chamber will manage on behalf of the firm. As mentioned above, these subsidies can mainly come from three sources: European Enterprise Network at European level, Camara de España at the Spanish level and ACCiÓ at the Catalan level. The amount of the subsidies varies according to the market and the cost of the trip. However, it tends to be around €700 for closer countries such as Morocco or Tunisia and €1,200 for further countries such as Cuba or the Dominican Republic.

Empirical approach

There is unanimity in considering that the help and direct channel to obtain subsidies are a very attractive characteristics of Chamber's services. Not only do firms value the fact of receiving money from the government to finance their internationalising activities, they consider of a greater importance the fact that the Chamber deals with all the bureaucracy involved.

According to some interviewees the subsidy helps to cover travel costs and represents a financing of around 30% of the mission, including enrolment price, agendas, flights, and hotels. All of the firms consider the direct channel for obtaining subsidies to be a differential point for the Chamber. Two firms state that they would not have hired the commercial service if there was not the subsidy. Another firm states that the subsidy is an incentive, and that they would not have had time to manage the paperwork on their own.

Although this aspect is highly valued, there are two firms that express some criticisms. One of them was, in the end, not able to receive the subsidy for problems at the Chamber of Spain

level. Although the Chamber had never guaranteed it 100%, the firm not receiving the subsidy felt disappointed at receiving the news, as this financial help was essential for them. Another firm also complains about the unjustified time it takes to receive the subsidy, which they consider should be payable the same year the mission was carried out and not so many months later. However, both of them express understanding when saying that this is not the Chamber's fault but a governmental issue.

Hence, H4 is supported both formally and empirically and it can be stated that the direct channel Chambers have for obtaining subsidies and the management of red tape involved are regarded as added values by firms hiring international services. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement concerning the liquidation time for subsidy reimbursement and guarantees for obtainment.

Is the Internet a threat to Chamber services? Strengths and weaknesses

Firms were asked about the role of the Internet in their internationalisation process to see whether it was a threat to the Chamber's international services, especially commercial missions. Three out of the five firms stated that they used the internet as a source of information both about the market and contacts proposed in the mission agenda parallel to the information proposed by the Chamber during the preparation of the mission. They made use of the internet mostly to get to know firm profiles as well as to obtain general economic information about markets, growing sectors, economic situation, on-going investments, and the politics of the country they were travelling to.

One of the firms with more international experience and with its own export department stated that in parallel to the mission they carried out a market study of the country on their own, using Internet information as a main source.

All firms stated that during the agenda creation process, while they exchanged information with interlocutors at destination they used the internet to contrast whether some of the contacts suggested suited their needs.

The internet is regarded as a wide source of information by all the interviewees. Four out of the five firms studied declare that, using the Internet, they could have managed to prepare an equivalent agenda of meetings to the one they received from the Chamber. Nevertheless, it would have been so time-consuming and costly that it would not have been worth it.

Especially, all the firms recognise many of Internet's disadvantages. First of all, the Internet gives you access to consulting profiles of firms and especially to forums where those firms are valued and ranked in their sectors. However, it is very hard to define the search especially when you are seeking contacts in an unknown market.

Secondly, all of the firms highlight that they could have found the contact of firms online but that they would not have managed to arrange a meeting as the Chamber and their delegates did. This feeling is common to all the interviewees which think that the Internet gives you access to contact details and opinions on a firm but does not guarantee you to be heard.

Thirdly, the group of firms think that the physical presence of Chambers' delegates in the country is of paramount importance in explaining the success of the service. Although further contact and management of invoices and commands can be made virtually, the first contact needs to be face to face for things to work more smoothly. As one of the interviewees stated, the mission, and therefore the physical visit to the market, marks a turning point in the internationalisation process of the firm.

Firms also value other aspects of the commercial missions that were not dealt with in the hypothesis. They unanimously consider the format of a group mission and the logistic support to be of great help.

On the one hand, the fact that an expert from the Chamber of Barcelona travels with the firms together with the fact that they advise which flight and hotel to take and give logistic support throughout the journey is regarded as very helpful. Interviewees highly appreciate the help in dealing with visas, hiring a driver when abroad and translators when needed. The Chamber also puts at availability their travel agency for a less problematic organisation of the trip. This sensation of on-going support and logistical assistance is considered to be a distinctive characteristic. Many firms recognise that the experience of the Chamber is made obvious throughout the organisation of the mission and that it is of enormous help.

On the other hand, and most importantly, interviewees state that being accompanied by other firms in the group mission is much more enriching than travelling on your own, for it represents a form of both emotional and professional support. The number of firms attending a mission can normally be from 5 to 12. All of the interviewees are delighted with the company of the other participants and they recognise it makes the trip easier both at a personal and professional level.

At a personal level because there is emotional support in an unknown country, there is an exchange of information during dinners in the hotel -which is the same for all participants- and many networking opportunities.

At a professional level, it is fruitful because most of the missions are pluri-sector and this leaves room to learn from others, for synergies to take place among participants as well as to discover new business opportunities. As an example of how this can be a positive exchange, we have the

case of one of the firms which, while exchanging ideas during a dinner, realised that one of the meetings that had not been interesting for them could be a profitable contact for another firm taking part in the mission. Also, among participants, new business opportunities were created, for instance logistics firms caught the attention of companies in need of export experts.

Innovation networks

The information and feedback obtained through the study of these cases can be useful to further study the topic of Chambers role in the 2.0 society and can be object of use to improve international services of the Chamber of Barcelona.

According to users' innovation theory and the study of innovation and entrepreneurial networks in Europe (Fernández Pérez and Rose 2010), collecting information from the consumer is a very important source of innovation ideas. In fact, what the consumer wants is a reflection of what is needed in the market (Fernández Pérez and Rose 2010). Firms need to look into consumer feedback and analyse whether it is possible to develop modifications to improve the service or product offered. This is why the case study carried out for this thesis can be of use to improve the quality of the bundle of services offered by the international department.

As interactions are an essential part of the development of innovations. It has been suggested that upstream and outward-looking innovative environments have helped transform successfully the products and services offered by many firms (Fernández Pérez and Rose 2010). Hence, it can be useful for the Chamber of Commerce to use the characteristics stated in the hypothesis as a differential strength to promote their services, for it has been shown that the legal public entity status, the global network, the price and the intermediation for the channelling of subsidies are regarded as key added values by target firms.

Moreover, using user feedback obtained through interviews, it can be useful for the Chamber to underline as a differential characteristic the logistic support offered throughout the whole process of the commercial mission as well as the positive fact that missions are grouped.

Along the same line, this work suggests to the Chamber of Barcelona the development of a strategy to better take advantage of networking possibilities among participants in missions. An exchange of information among groups participating in missions is regarded as a very positive asset both personally and professionally, the Chamber should be aware of how this can be of use before, during and after missions. Thus, proposing both an exchange of information between firms in a pre-mission environment and leisure activities during commercial missions where participants can naturally interact and easily take advantage of the group knowledge and experience.

Conclusions

The history of Chambers has been analysed, thus learning that Chambers of Commerce were born from protest and willingness to be heard by governments.

Despite their generalised initial lack of the resources, with time, they became an honourable brand associated with the promotion of trade, the improvement of legislations on defence of the business interest and the supply of information to firms.

Voicing business interests was their initial goal. However, this was soon supplemented with coffee and reading rooms, commercial arbitration, advice, and information. Later, their bundle of services continued evolving as employment bureaux and commercial examiners. Then came export certifications and an increasingly relevant role of business advisor for internationalisation.

The turning point for Chambers was, however, the fact of becoming a partner of the government, from the 1980s onwards, which meant increasing the bundle of services to apprenticeships and workforce training.

In particular, it has been analysed how the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce⁴⁴ (1886) after more than two decades relying on the sole financing of voluntary membership fees, in 1911 a Decree stated that membership to Chambers in Spain would become compulsory, these receiving a narrow percentage of the corporate tax. From then on, the Catalan Chambers have belonged to the continental model of Chambers of Commerce, in which membership is compulsory for all firms in their geographical scope. On the contrary, we talk about the Anglo-Saxon model where membership is voluntary.

A twist in the plot arrived with the removal, in 2011, of the compulsory membership fee; which represented 70% of revenue and now accounts for 30% of the financing of Chambers of Commerce in Catalonia and Spain.

This unforeseeable change, sunk the economic resources of the Chamber of Barcelona, and added to the growing weight of the Internet, may be a threat to the services of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, especially the international department.

In this work, it has been analysed how *crowdsourcing* in the Web 2.0 – that is, the process whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators used to create free content online, might be commonly used to undertake tasks that were once reserved for a few specialists, such as the Chamber.

Due to a lack of time and resources, this work focuses on the analysis of the commercial missions by the international department of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce. To know

⁴⁴ Permission has been given by the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona to use this information for this paper.

how to better position the international services and to analyse whether the web 2.0 poses a threat to them, the differential traits of commercial missions were sought.

Through the study of official texts, corporate promotional materials, and the development of five case studies, it has been demonstrated that what the web 2.0 has to offer is complementary to the commercial missions undertaken by the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona. This is true, especially for internationalisation processes in long-distance markets.

The four hypotheses of this work have been supported.

First, the status of public right entity is key to project an image of trust and neutrality, as it represents the general business interest. Plus, firms would rather go to a *semi*-public entity since it is not exclusively guided by profit-making as may happen with private consultancies.

Second, the worldwide Chamber network and the existence of interlocutors that are physically at destination is a trait of paramount importance that determines the quality of the international services. The network is useful both at public and private level. It offers contact with the homologous entities in other countries -that is, other chambers of commerce- but also to open doors to set up meetings with potential clients in the private sector that would otherwise be out of reach for firms at an individual level.

Third and fourth, the concepts of price and direct channel for obtaining subsidies represent the same advantage for firms: affordable internationalisation services. For small firms and start-ups, normally without many financial resources, the price is a key feature. These firms do not tend to have an export department and rely on the externalised service the Chamber for a relative low price.

For larger and more experienced firms, that employ their own export managers, the service of commercial mission presents competitive prices that are both time-saving and cost-advantageous.

The direct channel for subsidy obtainment is highly valued but there are also some criticisms concerning the lack of guarantees for ensuring the allocation from public calls or bids and the length of time it takes to get them reimbursed, as small firms may lack financial resistance to wait for reimbursements to arrive at the due date.

Throughout the analysis of the case studies, other added values for the commercial missions have been highlighted unanimously by interviewees. These being: on-going logistical support and the fact that missions were grouped. The Chamber of Barcelona can use this information to better position their services.

Inspired by the case studies, this thesis suggests that the Chamber of Barcelona develops a strategy to take advantage of networking possibilities among participants in commercial missions. Exchange of information among groups participating in missions is regarded as positive both personally and professionally. The Chamber should be aware of how this can be of use before, during and after missions. Thus, proposing the exchange of information between participants in a pre-mission environment and leisure activities during commercial missions where participants can naturally interact and easily take advantage of the group knowledge, experience, and create enriching synergies.

Although younger and born-global firms tend to rely on Internet as a source of foreign market information, the Web 2.0 seems a complementary tool to commercial missions. The role of the Chamber is justified as it has been shown through the five case studies that the Internet provides reachable data but, obviously, does not help the firm to act and set up a meeting.

Nowadays, online presence is necessary to spread the image of a brand and keep track of already-tied-up agreements. Nevertheless, in the internationalisation process, physical visits continue being the master key for developing fruitful and trustworthy business relationships internationally.

It can be stated that commercial missions by the Chamber make sense because they put at reach of all the firms' actual market experience and contacts. Thus, helping firms avoid falling in the *virtuality* gap by misreading online information, something that would be detrimental to their own export activity.

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