

Abstract - Fondazione Fiera Milano and the analysis of local economy

By Enrica Baccini and Antonia Ventura Kleissl

The study of firms exhibiting at Fiera Milano is useful to analyze some characteristics and trends of the Italian economy. This is particularly true in some key sectors, like Furniture, Fashion and Machinery, and for Italian industrial districts, well represented at Fiera Milano exhibitions. Since 2000 Fondazione Fiera Milano has aimed to objectively assess the role of Fiera Milano as an ideal vantage point for monitoring the Italian economy, by using a sample of companies and professionals participating in Fiera Milano exhibitions. It systematically gathers “live” information directly from the firms representing the Made in Italy, that animate the exhibition environment in Milan. In this paper the author aims at underlining the vitality and energy of firms, but also criticalities like the perception of competition and the level of innovation.

The surveyed sample of Fondazione Fiera Milano is dynamic, lively and driving for the territories of origin (North West Italy, North East Italy, Central Italy, South Italy and islands). The study aims at understanding the positioning of Italian companies in the international competitive arena. The analysis of the perception of competition shows that exhibiting firms are not afraid of foreign competitors and consider Italian firms their main competitors. The observation of the internationalization process, the share of revenues from abroad, the countries where Italian firms export their products let the author believe that the sample is made of very internationalized firms, active in the international arena and strongly oriented to the geographical diversification of international markets. The territories show some peculiar characteristics, but the average level is generally high. A further confirm comes from the approach to innovation, R&D and the use of exhibitions as a way to develop innovation. 90% of the sample declares it launched new products and approximately 50% declares it developed innovation process in the last year. The role of exhibitions in collaborative learning, knowledge creation and innovation transmission is confirmed by the survey results: approximately 50% of the sample aims at introducing innovation after the participation in an exhibition.

Moreover the sectorial analysis on Furniture, Fashion and Machinery combined with district affiliation and geographical origin, shows that in spite of the economic crisis, Italian firms have developed strategies to face difficulties. First of all the central role of innovation is confirmed by the substantial stability of the indicator of Fondazione Fiera Milano measuring commitment to Innovation. Exhibiting companies of Made in Italy have been trying to develop innovation to face the crisis, despite the difficult international situation of the 2009-2010 period and forecast of a slower increase when compared to the other EU countries. Each sector shows different strategies and results in terms of innovation and no constant factor was found to justify generalization. Nonetheless the trend of the indicator in the Fashion sector is increasing, companies declaring an

increase of innovation are more than those declaring a decrease (the indicator is in the positive interval); the value of the indicator slightly decreases in the Furniture sector, but keeps its position in the positive interval. Machinery confirms the positive trend, showing that innovation is fundamental in a innovation based sector in order to keep the leadership, even during an economic crisis.

The Self Confidence indicator, representing how entrepreneurs perceive the business outlook for their sector, shows a positive trend. Generally speaking the sectors with a better performance are those less dependent from the Italian market. It is important to underline that companies looking for new geographical markets, usually emerging markets, show a better performance. Therefore lively and confident firms, looking for new and dynamic markets, reach better results.

There are no big differences among territories concerning the performance of the items we have considered (competition, export, innovation). International exhibitions at Fiera Milano gather the most exporting, innovative and confident Italian firms. These firms largely belong to industrial districts (70% in the Furniture sector, 51% in Fashion, 30% in Machinery) and use exhibitions to compare to other companies (global buzz¹). These firms, thanks to high level production and innovation ability attract to Milan millions of businessmen each year and concur to the definition of Milan as global city, part of the main international economic network.

¹ Maskell (2004).