



A new communication and retail distribution formula in food sector

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Keywords: food industry, communication strategy, retail distribution strategy, medium-sized firms, Italy, business strategy, customer loyalty


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A new communication and retail distribution formula in food sector

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Abstract: Food and wine are typical products of exportation, as the Italian ones are recognised for its high quality, tradition or competitiveness in terms of quality/price. Therefore, the food sector represents a critical context for company opportunities. The research fits into this area of study. The purpose is to identify which communication and retail distribution strategy a medium-sized company in food sector could adopt in order to increase competitive advantage. Considering that the food sector is a mature one, we analysed how a *functional strategy* – the communication and distribution one – within a *main business strategy* may introduce new ideas and makes use of new means to convince consumers on the value of what they eat and on the correlation between the diet and health, improving customer loyalty. The treatise was carried out using the case study method. It emerged that a communication and retail distribution strategy of a medium-sized company operating in a mature sector such as the food may renew the classic and most traditional features of its formula, being successful.

Keywords: food sector; communication strategy; retail distribution strategy; food companies.

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1 Introduction

The food sector is highly representative of the Italian economic context, both in terms of the revenues of food companies and the exports of fine products. Moreover, food products are seen as an excellence of Made in Italy, generating consistent levels of appreciation around the world, thanks to the variety of fine food and wines and a combination of know-how, craftsmanship and traditions held by Italian producers (Giacosa et al., 2014b, 2014a). In addition, Made in Italy products have contributed over the years to strengthening Italian commercial specialisation in an international level, as they are the symbols of the Italian life-style (Crescimanno et al., 2014). In particular, it emerged an increasing degree of appreciation for Italian agri-food and wine in the international market (Crescimanno and Galati, 2014).

Food and wine are typical products of exportation, as the Italian ones are recognised for its high quality, tradition or competitiveness in terms of quality/price. It means that food companies' market is split into domestic and foreign: domestic markets refer to consumers who live or operate in that country and tourists, while foreign markets refer to those outside of the country.

The food sector represents a critical context for companies opportunities (Marks, 2011; Ritchie, 2009), due to a 'food tourism phenomenon' attracting expert persons (Clemente-Ricolfea et al., 2012; Groves and Belk, 1998) and to the positive impact on regional competitiveness and its drivers (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2008; Viassone, 2009; Vrontis and Viassone, 2013; Zanni, 2004). Nevertheless, the literature on the communication and retail distribution strategy applied by a food medium-sized company is rather scarce, especially conducted by case study method.

Addressing this knowledge gap, this research fits into this area of study. The purpose is to identify which communication and retail distribution strategy a medium-sized company in food sector could adopt in order to increase competitive advantage. Considering that the food sector is a mature one, we analysed how a *functional strategy* – the communication and distribution one – within a main *business strategy* (Brusa, 2014) may introduce new ideas and makes use of new means to convince consumers on the value of what they eat and on the correlation between the diet and health, improving customer loyalty.

The treatise was carried out using the qualitative method: the case study analysed, namely Eataly, is an Italian food chain of large and medium-sized retail shops and restaurants specialised in high-quality Italian food, drinks and wines.

This article is structured as follows. The research methodology is analysed in the second paragraph, while the literature review about the main issues of the study is outlined in the third one. In the fourth section, the findings of the case study are analysed and a discussion of the results is engaged in the fifth one, while conclusions, implications and limitations of the research are set out in the end of the research.

2 Research methodology

In order to meet the aim of this research, the following research question has been set forth, as outlined above:

- *RQ*: Could the communication and retail distribution strategy – a functional strategy – of a medium-sized food company renew its classic and most traditional features, despite the food sector is a mature one?

The research methodology was structured in two steps: the first one was dedicated to the analysis of the main literature concerning the communication and retail distribution aspects in the food sector, while the second step was focused on a specific case study.

In the *first stage*, we made a framework about the commercial strategy and it came to light that there was a lack of case studies that deal with the commercial strategy adopted by medium-sized companies in the food sector, through which an efficient and effective model might be identified.

In the *second stage* the case study method was adopted, through a qualitative approach. The second stage is strongly connected to the first, as this one highlights a series of points to be taken into account when selecting and analysing the case. In addition, the contextualisation of the theoretical principles is helpful to analyse the variables of the real case, which is conducted through a combination of casual mechanisms.

Case study method is appropriate for several reasons (Dana and Dana, 2005). First, this method permits to investigate the complex dynamics of the phenomenon, avoiding a simple descriptive approach: the case study method permits to focus on the dynamics of each variable that composed the analysed phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989), emerging its multiple facets (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). Second, the business strategy adopted by a company operating in the food sector is quite specific, due both to its organisational structure and functioning, and environment impact (Merriam, 1988). Third, it permits to analyse a phenomenon in its real-life context and dynamics, despite the absence of a strong theoretical basis (George and Bennett, 2005; McKeown, 2004; Siggelkow, 2002, 2007). Last, the case study method permits to generate and test theory on the investigated topic (Eckstein, 1975; Siggelkow, 2007), creating significant knowledge and enriching the background with ground-breaking insights (Amabile et al., 2001; Burgelman, 1983; Leonard-Barton, 1990).

In particular, we used an explanatory case study (Johansson, 2002; Kotlar and De Massis, 2013; Rolf, 2003) as it permits to understand how a phenomenon takes place. This explanatory case study permits to verify how and why Eataly's choices are effective and efficient both in terms of an increased appeal and customer loyalty. We started studying the Eataly company in 2010, adopting several information sources.

Our choice has been addressed on a single case study (Eataly) due to its relevance in our research, despite several limitations of the single case study method (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). Firstly, Eataly is characterised by a series of features interesting for observation (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995), which are generally inter-connected (Yin, 2003) and have to converge, revealing the relationships and logic among different variables into the food sector (Eisenhardt, 1989; Graebner and Eisenhardt, 2004). Secondly, the boundaries between the contemporary phenomenon in question (i.e., communication and distribution strategy) and its context (i.e., the food sector) are not clear-cut: if this were not the case, the results yielded by the case study would not be significant (Yin, 1984). Thirdly, the Eataly case proved interesting despite its highly specific nature, since it yielded certain insights that would not have been provided by other business entities. Lastly, the decision to use a single case study, which is characterised by eclecticism and pragmatism (Rolf, 2003) proved representative in relation to the target population (Gerring, 2007) inasmuch as Eataly is an extreme, unique, representative and leading case (Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). It is extreme, as commercial strategy has a central role in this philosophy, both in terms of product range and distribution channels. It is unique in its genre, on the strength of a commercial formula for which customers could purchase and eat high-quality food and have food-related education. It is representative, as it manifests a new cultural customers behaviour towards high-quality food; it is a leading case, which illustrates how a modified consumer perception regarding food may represent a new and winning commercial formula.

We called upon *multiple information* sources to conduct the case study (Eisenhardt, 1989): indeed, different potential qualitative and quantitative data sources should improve findings credibility (Patton, 1990). *Interview* was the primary data source in our

case study, since this makes it possible to analyse a phenomenon at various levels (Alvesson, 2003; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The interview was of a semi-structured nature (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Corbetta, 2003), it was targeted and it was constituted by articulated questions about the company and its communication and retail distribution strategies. In particular, we interviewed several informants: Nicola Farinetti (the son of the founder of Eataly Oscar Farinetti), who is the current CEO (in the following, CEO); a marketing manager (MM), and seven employees working in the shops and restaurants (E). These informants were interviewed more than once. We realised 15 interviews with nine different individuals. These interviews were conducted in 2012, 2013 and 2014 and had a qualitative nature. They were prepared by three authors, but they were carried out by two of them and lasted approximately two hours, during which the pre-determined structure was followed. The results of the interviews were then analysed by three authors autonomously, so that their results would not be influenced by each other's interpretations (Atkinson and Shaffir, 1998; Jönssön and Lukka, 2005). The authors then compared the results that they had each obtained.

To achieve data triangulation (Stake, 2013; Yin, 1984), we also used *secondary sources*: direct observations collected in Eataly retail shops and restaurants, during which we observed organisational life in the company and obtained rich information about several aspects of the business activities; non-participant observations in which informants were followed during casual meeting in the company; documentation taken from Eataly websites, as well as the interviews with Oscar Farinetti published on economic, financial and marketing magazines and books. Secondary information sources were combined with data drawn from the interviews in a sort of 'triangulation process' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Jick, 1979; Pettigrew, 1990; Stake, 2013; Yin, 1984) by which adopting different angles to observe a phenomenon, improving findings validity and avoiding post hoc rationalisation (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014).

We then systematically *analysed qualitative data*, using double-level codification, categorisation and contextualisation (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014; Kotlar and De Massis, 2013), also making some ongoing variations in our research design and identifying some new aspects to observe. The first level of data codification was realised in relation to the formalised management system of Eataly; in particular, we used as conceptual anchors the functional structure of the organisation, the management structure and mechanisms, as well as the strategies applied for growth. The content of various texts was fragmented in units of analysis, which were then classified in the previously defined categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The second level of codification was open (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and axial, with the purpose to identify the values and the management procedures applied in the core innovation strategy of the company.

3 Literature

By analysing the food sector, it emerged various business opportunities for companies (Marks, 2011; Ritchie, 2009), both in terms of revenues and in attracting the so-called food tourism (Clemente-Ricolfea et al., 2012; Giacosa et al., 2014b; Groves and Belk, 1998). Consequently, the food sector creates a deep impact on local competitiveness and on its drivers (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2008; Rossi et al., 2012; Viassone, 2009; Vrontis and Viassone, 2013; Zanni, 2004).

Several typologies of food companies have been identified in terms of size: the first group includes medium and large-sized companies operating in a global market, while the second group is composed of smaller companies operating in a niche market and with a modest or insistent internationalisation vision (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Birley, 1985; Giacosa et al., 2014b). The role of networks between companies has been observed in terms of increasing performance in a cluster of firms (Brown and Butler, 1995; Chiffolleau et al., 2007; Ohmae, 1989).

The food consumption has been observed in its trend, analysing the impact of socio-demographic, cultural, political and economic behaviour of the context in which companies operate (Giacosa et al., 2014a; López-Valeiras Sampedroa et al., 2010). It emerged that food consumption is influenced by both individual characteristics and the external environment variables. With particular reference to individual perceptions (Frank et al., 2002; Hall and Hall, 1990; Harrisson and Huntington, 2000; Hoecklin, 1995; Naspettia and Zanolina, 2014; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Vukasovičab, 2014), the consumer behaviour is influenced by both subjective and objective aspects (Cavicchi, 2008; Kokodeya, 2012; Lancaster, 1971; Steenkamp, 1989): several dimensions impact in subjective terms, such as appearance, healthiness and convenience (Dubois and Czellar, 2002), brand knowledge (Dotson et al., 2012; Lusk, 2001), local origin of the product thanks to the geographical indications of origin (Arsilab et al., 2014; Gloy and Akridge, 2000; Teubera, 2010) and purchasing price. Specifically, purchasing price is the classical lever used by companies to increase the product's desirability by making the product even more exclusive and unique (Erickson and Johansson, 1995; Changa et al., 2013). In objective terms, the products intrinsic features have an impact on the consumption trend: the organoleptic level and packaging (Bland, 2004; Pastore and Vernuccio, 2003) and the preservation methods (Nielsen, 2008) could offer up benefits in terms of lower costs, higher productivity levels, product quality and customer satisfaction (Brunso et al., 2002; Cavicchi, 2008; Pleschak and Sabisch, 1996). These benefits are interrelated, inasmuch as higher quality raw materials mean a higher quality of the finished product, which, in its turn, generates greater customer satisfaction.

The commercial strategy has been observed with reference to a series of choices concerning the marketing mix variables (Borden, 1964; McCharty, 1964; Constantinides, 2006; Dixon and Blois, 1973; Fabris and Minestrone, 2004; Kumar Panda and Sreekumar, 2012; Pellicelli, 2005), and illustrating the relationship between the company and its clientele. In particular, we analysed a series of studies concerning the adopted communication methods and retail distribution one.

Regards to the communication variable (Lambin, 2008; Morelli, 1997), companies are usual to adopt a multi-sensorial approach for attracting the customers (Clarke et al., 2012) during each commercialisation and promotion activity, increasing the brand awareness (Kapferer, 2002; Giacosa, 2012) and improving their sensory experiences and expectations towards food (Asiolia et al., 2014). In addition, the use of the societing marketing is increased, focusing on the connection between new forms of sociability, the symbolic value of the goods, and the role of consumers as partner and client (Fabris, 2009).

The role of communication is not only about selling, but also about conveying a message for growing feeding desire and increasing the corporate reputation towards stakeholders (Balmer and Gray 1999; De Pelsmacker et al., 2001; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001; Grunig, 2003). With particular reference to the corporate reputation, this is relevant for a food company, as the intrinsic quality of each product has a direct influence on the

consumer health (Brunso et al., 2002; Mazzei, 2004). Communication is not limited to describe the product, but it has to distinguish it from others (Kapferer, 2002), pointing out the absolute values of the brand (Arnold, 1992; Michel, 2000). In addition, each promotion activity has the purpose to make a brand visible to a wider range of customers (Giacosa, 2012): communication increases brand visibility, thanks to considerable advertising investments combined to outdoor sale locations in outstanding places. When the food product has a high quality, the communication does not focus on price, but it is frequently omitted: this is due to the fact that the faithful customer is attracted by the other attributes and by the objective and subjective characteristics of the products, and not by a purchasing price (King, 1990).

A food company uses both explicit communication and intentional one (Busacca, 1994; Costabile, 2001; Volli, 1994). The first one is addressed to potential new customers and has higher costs than mass communication, because companies allocate resources for an individual customer relationship. The second one is intended to maintain a positive relationship with existing customers by using some impersonal and mass marketing tools with standardised message and different target. For both communication typologies, some features are essential for the relationship between the company and the consumer, such as the corporate heritage, which represents a patrimony of history deriving from the accumulation over time of reputation, trust, values and prestige handed down through the generations, and the corporate ethical values, which impact on customer loyalty (Invernizzi, 2004).

The retail distribution represents a fundamental moment of the relationship between a company and its customers. In the case of a high food product, an almost direct relationship must be established with the customers, exalting their aspirations in terms of wellness and product nutrition and stressing the product's exclusiveness. Each shop represents the featured elements of a brand, it gives importance to the product range (Ceriani, 2001; Tuan, 1977) and it generates a strong consumer emotion according to the benefits from a high quality product (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Huang, 2001; Gobé, 2001; Roth, 2001). Each shop develops not only on the product-service mix, but also on the perception of the customer when he/she is in the shop (Cheng and Chi, 2009; Wang and Ha, 2011).

The researchers underlined the evolution in shops role (Giacosa, 2011): from being a sale point, it becomes a place where the customers are involved in an experiential dimension with food and where they can build up a relationship with the diet and the wellness and enjoy themselves (Castaldo and Botti, 1999). In a food shop, the company transmits to the target the features of the product in a place where each consumption event may represent a source of fun and entertainment. Sometimes, the shop becomes a consumption food cathedral, set in strategic places that are really attractive and important (Ritzer, 2000). A food product may become a status symbol, namely the ostentation of the economic value of the chosen food product, with the possibility for the consumer to express their identity and their preferences (Zaghi, 2009).

The atmosphere of a shop has been considered as a relevant aspect: it is a silent language of communication and it is perceived through the five senses (De Luca, 2000; De Luca and Vianelli, 2001; Donovan and Rossister, 1982; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This perception is based on a set of tangible and intangible elements (Bruce and Hines, 2007; Giunta, 2008; Pellicelli, 2005) to which scholars have attributed the capacity to influence the emotional states and therefore the purchasing behaviour of

individuals (Schmitt, 1999; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997), and the atmosphere is a new form of marketing and distribution channel. When a point of sale can encourage consumers and stimulate impulse purchases, it becomes an effective communicational tool. If a shop is characterised by a positive atmosphere and a propensity to act with enthusiasm, spontaneity and freedom (Rook and Gardner, 1993), it becomes more enjoyable and satisfying (Bellenger and Kargaonkar, 1980), increasing customer retention (Jarboe and McDaniel, 1987).

The customer perception is influenced by the visual merchandising (Fady and Seret, 1992; Lugli, 2009; Masson and Wellhoff, 1999, 2001; Pellegrini, 1993), which may be improved using some techniques, such as the organisation of space, the choice of instruments exhibition, the identification of the paths inside the shopping place and the product layout into several departments and aggregation of goods.

The choice of locations is also relevant, as it must guarantee the brand full visibility: consequently, the shops should be set in the most important shopping streets or crucial points of a place (Giacosa, 2012; Kent, 2007).

Despite the importance of food sector in the world economy, the literature review revealed a lack of qualitative studies on the communication and retail distribution strategy in a medium-sized food company. This study addresses this knowledge gap, investigating whether or not, in the food sector, the communication and retail distribution strategy may introduce new ideas and makes use of new means to convince consumers on the value of what they eat and on the correlation between the diet and health, improving customer loyalty.

4 The case study

4.1 The founder and the history of Eataly

The history of Eataly is linked to the history of its founder, Oscar Farinetti (Sartorio, 2008; Farinetti, 2009). Born in 1954, he absorbed the secrets of doing business from a young age, through his family business: after returning from the Second World War, his father dedicated himself to the sales trade, first as a baker (a trade he learned when working as a shop boy for a local pasta maker), and then in coffee roasting, when he created the company UniEuro. The latter was then expanded into a supermarket offering groceries and other items for the home. In addition, when he was a child, his love of good food was marked by such episodes from an early age, as his palate proved an immense source of pleasure during good eating.

Little Oscar therefore learned the standard terms of commerce from an early age, absorbing the secrets of being a good business owner from his father. A natural predilection for challenges runs in his DNA: the child felt that pleasant sensation that comes with facing a challenge, which his peers would perhaps have appreciated less. That very day, he felt like “he was being accompanied by an invisible little monkey, constantly poised to edge him on to face the next challenge, arming him with new-found grit and energy, even when, as an adult, his projects might have seemed like mere utopias to the less attentive and those of lesser faith” (Sartorio, 2008).

After dedicating himself to his studies, Oscar Farinetti joined his father’s business venture. It was in UniEuro Market that he began to hone his managerial and commercial

skills, learning about the possibilities of emotional marketing. Following on from that work experience, in the 1980s, he decided to become a salesperson for household electrical appliances and computer goods. Through the brand UniEuro, he opened up the benefits of technology to his customers, increasing his total revenue through the acquisition of the brand Trony.

The turning-point in his working life came when he felt the desire to sell goods displayed live, rather than continuing to sell household electrical appliances and computing goods. The business venture of Eataly started in 2002, when Farinetti sold the UniEuro brand (which had a commercial chain across all of Italy) to the British Group DSG International. In Eataly, Oscar Farinetti wanted to offer up the very best of Italian gastronomy, fully aware of the richness and quality of the Italian food and wine culture. The name of the brand (a combination between the terms 'eat' and 'Italy') presented choosing Italian food as a decision to eat properly, given the high quality and nutritional value of the Mediterranean diet.

Oscar Farinetti wanted to convince people about the importance of good food. Indeed, by way of example, only 35% of Italians knew what the difference was between soft wheat and durum wheat, while over 60% knew what an ABS was. Oscar Farinetti also laid the blame at the hands of the sellers, in that "car salesmen explain what ABS means, while food sellers don't explain anything. When you sell an apple on a stand, all you see is the price. But there are two hundred types of apples. Eataly was created to encourage people to start talking about apples" (Farinetti, 2009).

Searching its providers, Farinetti travelled all round Italy with the purpose to find the best artisans of good food: wine growers, farm workers, breeders, fishermen and transformers.

The first Eataly store opened in Turin, Italy, in 2007, followed by Milan, Italy, in the same year. In 2008, Eataly started its international expansion, with new opening in Tokyo, New York, Middle and Far East. Eataly now has 30 stores in Italy, in USA, and in the Middle and Far East. The next openings are planned in Los Angeles, Washington, Boston and New York (in the World Trade Centre), while there are already contracts in place for openings in Moscow, San Paolo and London.

The company aims to achieve consolidated revenues in 2014 of around 400 million euro (excluding the franchisees) and an EBITDA of 75%, while in 2013 the consolidated revenues were 226.1 million Euro (with a net profit of 2.6 million Euro). Oscar Farinetti with his sons has expressed the will to introduce Eataly to the stock exchange by 2017, with the aim to transform the company into a global public one in the representation of the Italian lifestyle.

Eataly has as president Oscar Farinetti, and three CEOs: Francesco and Nicola Farinetti (Oscar's sons) and Luca Baffigo Filangieri (a minor shareholder). The organisational structure is quite flexible and articulated by 'categories', that are different food-groups, i.e., fish, cheese, meat, fruits and vegetables, wine, and so on. Each category has a specific category manager, who is in charge of the entire processes of supply chain management and customer relationship management. In addition, the company has different staff teams involved in several activities, such as innovation, supply, safety and quality, check-out and lay-out, promotion, new shops opening, public relations, events and education, managerial accounting, and information system.

4.2 The Eataly's commercial strategy

In terms of communication activities, it emerged that the company always strengthens its commercial strategy with the purpose to promote a wide variety of goods in terms of their product category and region of origin, and to continuously improve the quality of the existing products. These communication efforts relate each aspect of its commercial formula:

- *Buy*: clients can make their shopping, choosing between a vast range of high-quality products at sustainable prices, that respect the Slow Food philosophy, or any of the numerous specialties prepared at the delicatessen. The seasonality is the philosophy in selecting the products for sale, with the purpose both to improve the quality and authenticity of the products and to reduce sell price. Indeed, Eataly's promotional message is "Let's wisen up! Products in season taste better and cost less";
- *Eat*: clients can go to Eataly to taste high-quality foods cooked directly on-site. Thanks to this additional service, the turnover of raw materials is increased, while avoiding unsold warehouse stock and being forced to throw products away;
- *Learn*: this service has the purpose to educate customers in valorising the correlation between diet and health. To reach this goal, each shop is a place where the company could inform consumers on food nutritional values and cooking methods to both valorise the taste and the nutritional intake. The Eataly's motto is 'To satisfy your appetite, while learning'. A series of themed events and cooking courses, tastings and food education meetings with important chefs are organised, with different target audiences and themes. In addition, many books are available to customers for improving their culinary knowledge.

Each promotional message is "intended to exploit the high quality of raw materials, the seasonality of the products, and its origin, focusing on the benefit of its clients in terms of wellness and on intangible features of the product" (MM). Indeed, fruit and vegetables are commercialised in accordance with their seasonality, and the immaterial attributed of the products have the role to increase the consumer's emotions and desires linked with treating oneself to the best.

Eataly communicates the possibility to buy and eat high-quality foods at sustainable prices to a vast target, addressing their choices toward the cult of food and, in particular, taking a healthy, knowledgeable approach to their diet. The spirit of Eataly is then reflected in the identity of *slow food*, an Italian and internationalised not-for-profit association directed at the promotion of good, clean, fair food, or rather, a rival to fast food.

"The spirit of its communications is addressed to reach a long-lasting relationship with the customers, increasing their loyalty to the brand" (MM). Therefore, each communicational message is not limited to describing a product, but its purpose is wider: it also shows the absolute values and peripheral system of values of a brand.

The communication strategy is based on a clear and easy message; in addition, typical communication tools are not used, as they are not directed to a specific target. On the contrary, Eataly uses newspapers and posters in their stores, whose main theme is represented by the harmony, quality, passion and tradition.

In addition, the communication strategy focuses attention on the consumer perception of pricing: “the goal is to convince the consumer of the intrinsic relationship between diet and health, stressing the value of what s/he eats, and to show that the price difference between a high-quality food and a standard one is not as big as they might think” (CEO).

The communication strategy is managed internally both by the Farinetti family and the commercial team. “If an anti-model company as Eataly does not internally manage its commercial side, it is destined to not go far” (CEO). This causes a “new general mind-set involving all levels of employees, in every functional area and at each hierarchical level” (E#1). The Farinetti family is markedly involved: firstly, Oscar Farinetti, the founder, who oversaw the commercial activity for many years thanks to his expertise acquired in the commercial sector and its culinary one, and secondly Farinetti’s sons (Francesco, Nicola and Andrea Farinetti), who are “the bearers of new ideas, projects and technologies” (MM).

In terms of retail distribution strategy, the distribution network comprises a combination of privately-owned stores (and not in franchising) so as to maintain control of the company brand. “The distribution process is managed in an innovative, streamlined manner by avoiding the intermediaries, for the purpose both of monitoring the product quality level and obtaining savings which benefit the consumer” (MM).

The retail distribution structures have many different sizes: large commercial spaces which represent the classic distribution model, where the ‘buy-eat-learn’ combination is supported by the large scale of the space (like the first Eataly store opened in Turin or the one in New York), but also smaller ones (such as Eataly in Milan), which “adopt the classic distribution model in miniature” (CEO). For instance, when the first store was opened in 2007 in Turin (Italy), this location choice was due to a marked history in food sector of Turin and to the presence of international events correlated to this culinary tradition, on a par with other European gourmet capitals; in addition, the space of 11,000m² was divided into different theme-related areas, creating the classic distribution model of Eataly. After Turin, the Eataly philosophy was then established in Milan in 2007, through a miniature concept store with a surface area of 250m², which is the export model. When the international expansion started in 2008, with new opening in Tokyo, New York, Middle and Far East, the purpose was to challenge the fast food model with that of slow food, offering both Made in Italy foods exported from Italy and fresh products supplied in local markets but cooked following Italian traditions.

In each Eataly shop, the food is protagonist: it is sold in different stands, articulated in product categories, where customers could make individually their choice. In addition, according to the ‘eat and buy’ formula, informal and friendly themed restaurants are located in front of the outlet selling that product category, permitting customers to taste what they have bought.

Even the choice of locations of the Eataly stores is symptomatic of a counter-trend approach: the stores are located in important cities in Italy and abroad, but also in commercial areas with high traffic. Each store becomes a food cathedral, where the customer could enjoy eating and spending time. “The space is laid out appealingly according to thematic areas, so that clients can allow themselves to be drawn in by the culinary skills of the chefs and taste their delicacies” (E#2).

5 Discussion

Communication strategy has a relevant role in Eataly commercial strategy, as all activities begin with communication and, as a result, they occur in relation to what has been communicated. In other terms, as Eataly was created for describing an apple, each and every thing they offer needs to be set out as a narrative description, underling the relevant role of the communication activity in a food sector towards both consumers and stakeholders (Balmer and Gray 1999; De Pelsmacker et al., 2001; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001; Grunig, 2003).

Each communication choice has been made by considering both individual characteristics and socio-demographic, cultural, political and economic aspects of the context, which could impact on food consumption (Giacosa et al., 2014a; López-Valeiras Sampedroa et al., 2010). In particular, Eataly's communication strategy takes into strong consideration both objective and subjective aspects related to consumer perceptions (Cavicchi, 2008; Lancaster, 1971; Steenkamp, 1989). All communication efforts, relating each aspect of its commercial formula (buy-eat-learn), are strongly focused on the innovativeness. In particular, the didactic role of Eataly, which represents an innovative side of its offer, is motivated both by its desire to encourage the 90% of the population that still do not consume high-quality foods, to choose healthy, high-end food, and also the increasing of customer loyalty.

To emphasise the role of the food in a balance diet, traditional communication instruments are not enough (Busacca, 1994; Costabile, 2001; Volli, 1994): the use of information panels and suggestions in the shops permit to better describe and explain the origin of the products and how they are processed, getting a great attention from customers. These instruments strengthen the relationship between the company and the consumer in terms of corporate heritage and corporate ethical values (Invernizzi, 2004).

In addition, the choice of focusing on seasonality of food represents a correct strategy both to increase the wellness from food and to reduce the selling prices. When consumers are attracted to visual pathways dedicated to the seasonality of the products exposed in the shops, consumers may be convinced that foods in season are tastier, better and less expensive.

Also the choice of a wide target (and not limited to rich people) is a right commercial strategy: generally, Eataly prefer to offer its products to all those consumers who give much importance to the quality of what they eat, in full awareness of the repercussions this could have on their quality of life. It means that Eataly target is composed of new potential customers and existing loyal ones (Busacca, 1994; Costabile, 2001; Volli, 1994) and this choice has positive effects both in terms of an expansion of the customers and on a diffusion of the high quality food. In addition, high quality product consists of a product system, which combines both tangible and intangible elements, whose union has to attract the new consumers and strengthen the loyalty of the existing ones (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997; Schmitt, 1999), while the price does not represent an element on which the company bases its commercial policy (King, 1990).

The choice to manage the communication strategy internally makes Eataly an anti-model company, as it manages the communication aspect without the help of external consultants. This caused a new general *mind-set* involving all levels of the organisational structure, in every functional area and at each hierarchical level.

The adopted distribution model is innovative as it hasn't intermediaries and the distribution structures is characterised by several sizes shops and restaurants: the classic

distribution model (large-sized Eataly shops) have the possibility to offer the whole formula 'buy-eat-learn' in a large scale of the space, but also smaller ones adopt the classic distribution model in miniature. This permits to export the commercial formula around the world, offering both Made in Italy foods and fresh products supplied in local markets, but cooked following Italian traditions. Each Eataly shop, despite its size, becomes a place where the customer is involved in an experiential dimension with food and each event becomes an opportunity to fun and enjoy (Castaldo and Botti, 1999).

Even the space is strongly appealing, thanks the combination of thematic areas, and their informal atmosphere (De Luca, 2000; De Luca and Vianelli, 2001; Donovan and Rossiter; 1982; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The setting is authoritative thanks to the quality of the foods supplied and the professionalism of the staff, but also informal, thanks to the family ambience of the various sections.

6 Conclusions, implications and limitations

The commercial offer in Italy is highly competitive within its context: indeed, the 'buy, eat, learn' formula is not offered by any other firm of the same scale as Eataly.

Highly innovative ideas are supported by traditions and commercial experience acquired by the family in the food and wine sector. With particular reference to Oscar Farinetti, his business venture was influenced by his native environment, which strongly impacts on the business ideas and opportunity of the entrepreneur. For Oscar Farinetti, Alba (the Farinetti's native town, known throughout the world for its luxurious fragrant truffle) was indissolubly connected to that of the surrounding countryside, where various food companies are localised (such as Ferrero and many famous wineries companies). Therefore, his home environment was strongly characterised by important culinary traditions. In addition, a combination between innovative and traditional commercial approaches favours the venture success, achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage.

Eataly case study demonstrates that a communication and retail distribution strategy of a medium-sized company operating in a mature sector such as the food may renew the classic and most traditional features of its formula, being successful. Thanks to its new commercial formula, the intention behind Eataly was to establish a food culture among customers, so that they would acquire an understanding of the quality of foods, the differences between them, and how they are produced.

Eataly's strategy based both on the absence of intermediaries and on the formula buy-eat-learn, combining purchasing with eating and learning, is not offered by any other firm of the same scale as Eataly and it has demonstrated its success not only in Italy but all around the world, especially in terms of growth and financial performances: therefore, it represents an innovative way to make a new commercial strategy in food sector.

In addition, Eataly represents the manifestation of the Made in Italy in the world, thanks to the high quality of the raw materials, to the variety of fine wines and food, and a combination of know-how, craftsmanship and traditions held by Italian producers. The food sector represents an important driver for Italy: in this context, the wine and food sector has been considered a key factor for increasing tourism, due to its ability to attract both tourists and experts. Furthermore, Eataly is improving its success also in foreign countries, where the Italian food is recognised for a high quality value.

This study holds implications for the attitude of the Italian food sector, as a testimonial of Made in Italy around the world. In addition, it highlights the importance of innovation in terms of commercial strategy, with the purpose to increase customer loyalty and company competitive advantage. Lastly, the choice to offer its products to all those consumers who give much importance to the quality of what they eat represents a successful strategy. Eataly's business model represents an opportunity both for food companies and those operating in other areas related to the food, such as wine bars, restaurants, research laboratories, food consulting firms and e-commerce companies.

The study has some limitations concerning to the applied methodology: multiple case studies method would be useful to widen the boundaries of the research, both to analyse the commercial strategy management in other food company sectors or in different sectors than food. In relation to the interview technique, we would set out to increase the number of interviews, by also questioning managers and employees working in the company, as opposed to family members. Furthermore, it could be very useful, maintaining the focus on this case study, but widening the analysis of the critical success factors, through the observation of the main operational processes of the company.

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