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International Fairs in the Modern Food Systems

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ABSTRACT

International trade fairs are an important marketing tool for the expanding organic market. Although much output is marketed locally and there is a growing demand for the so-called zero miles products, Italian organic raw materials and processed foods are largely exported. For the first time, a direct survey has been conducted on 100 Italian firms attending BioFach 2009, to analyze aspects like activities performed, goals and expectations, forms of private – public partnerships. By using seven relevant variables, the firms are grouped into five categories. The same firms have been contacted after one month, to assess results, level of satisfaction and willingness to participate in a next edition.

Keywords: Trade fairs, Organic trade, Italy, BioFach, Classification tree
JEL Classification: M31, Q13

1 Introduction

In 2008, the world market for organic food was about 50 billion USD, doubling its 2003 value of 25 billion dollars (Sahota, 2010). The highest growth has occurred in North America, but the European market too is extremely important (Shaack and Willer, 2010), at about 26 billion US$. As recognized by Raynolds (2004, p. 725) "the organic agro-food system has been transformed from a loosely coordinated local network of producers and consumers to a globalized system of formally regulated trade which links socially and spatially distant sites of production and consumption". Danes are the strongest individual consumers (132 €/year), but Germany is the biggest national market (5,850 million € in 2008). The European market is very competitive, with supermarkets, private labels, specialized shops, discounters, public procurement and an endless number of local initiatives (Canavari, Centonze and Nigro, 2007).

In December 2008, over 50,000 Italian farmers were managing organically about one million hectares (1 ha = 2.5 acres) and this puts Italy among the leading producing countries in the world (Willer and Kircher, 2009). In that same year there were 7,566 organic food processors: 42% located in the Northern regions, 33% in the South and 24% in the Center. The domestic organic retail sales were estimated at 1.7 billion €, with exports valued in 2008 at 900 million Euros (Shaack and Willer ,2010), according to SINAB (National Information System on Organic Agriculture) and AIAB (Italian Association for Organic Agriculture), one of the major organic farmers' associations.

Italian organic food firms traditionally export into Northern European countries, mainly Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, since the early 1980's. At present, destination markets (Callieris, Cardone, Guarrera, Pinton, and Santucci, 2010) are also the USA, Japan, Russia, Gulf Countries and even China.

While small farmers and small food processors – as well as many consumers – tend to prefer local markets, zero miles approaches, box schemes and similar forms of Community Supported Agriculture (Schmid, Hamm, Richter and Dahlke 2004; Hingley, Boone and Haley, 2010), larger producers, farmers'

cooperatives, as well as food SMEs search for markets abroad (Santucci, 2009), motivated by better prices and higher volumes, over a longer period of time, and mainly for Business to Business (B2B) contacts. For these purposes, international trade fairs, although belonging to a century-old model, remain a great opportunity for any export strategy (Beier and Dambock, 2006), but appropriate consideration, planning, budgeting and preparation are consequently required (Miller, 2000). Several aspects of trade fairs have been investigated (Barczyk, Glisan and Lesch, 1989; Bello, 1992; Bonoma, 1983; Carman, 1986; Dekimpe, Francois, Gopalakrishna, Lilien and Van den Bulte, 1997; Hanson, 2004; Kerin and Cron, 1987; Ling-Yee, 2007; Rosson and Seringhaus, 1995; Shoham, 1999), to improve the quality of participation and to elaborate guidelines for a successful attendance. Lee and Kim (2008) even indicate the relevance of each component, in their three-stage model: pre-show, at-show and post-show activities.

On the other hand, since the costs linked with international fairs are usually too high for small or medium size companies (Williams, Gopalakrishna and Cox, 1993; Banterle, Carrraresi and Stranieri, 2010), collective participation (several firms sharing the same booth, personnel traveling together, goods shipped in the same lorry or container, etc.) facilitate the presence of smaller firms (Evers and Knight, 2008), especially if they can share a common vision and similar goals (Molnar, Gellynk, Vanhonacker and Verbeke, 2010).

Italian regional governments (Italy comprises 19 regions and two autonomous provinces), as well as the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and the Italian Trade Commission, traditionally support the participation in international fairs, usually with a cost sharing approach, but no research has been previously carried out to investigate the quality of the presence and the effectiveness of public and private investments, with a special focus on the agro-food sector.

2 Methodology

The research reported in this article had several goals: a) to describe the evolution of the Italian participation in Biofach in its the last editions; b) to analyze the motivations, purposes, activities, forms of participation, satisfaction, level of integration, limitations and problems, etc. of the firms exhibiting in 2009; and, c) to understand the elements that drive the decision to participate in a following edition.

For achieving these objectives, several research methods have been implemented (Miller and Salkind, 2002). First, a desk study was initially performed in Italy, by consulting the Biofach catalogues of the last five years. Then a direct survey was conducted during the fair in Germany, on a sample of 100 firms randomly extracted from the 254 firms attending the 2009 BioFach edition, proportionally stratified by the 17 represented Italian regions, with a follow-up three months later. Before Biofach, a questionnaire was elaborated, tested with the representatives of some firms and modified. It is composed of two parts: Part A, to be filled at the fair, with 26 close ended questions of different typologies - multiple choices, Likert, scoring and yes/not (Patton, 2002), and Part B, with 12 questions of similar typologies. Part A covers the following subjects: category of the exhibitors, products, region of origin, 2008 turnover by class of amount, previous participation in international fairs and in BioFach, criteria for attendance, goals and objectives, form of participation (independent or collective), activities before and during the fair, sources of financial support, general opinion about the fair. Part B of the questionnaire explores the outcome in terms of satisfaction (related to specific activities and to the whole presence), lessons learnt, planning of next actions, and the likelihood to participate in a next edition of BioFach.

Part A of the questionnaire was filled by the Authors in Nurnberg from the 19th to 21st February 2009. Each interview took between 15 and 20 minutes. A second group of 50 firms, also stratified by regions, had been extracted, to replace those cases where the representative of the firm was not available or denied to be interviewed. However, only the representatives of eight firms refused to respond and were consequently replaced.

After one month, the same 100 companies were re-contacted, by telephone and e-mail, to remind the respondents to fill Part B of the questionnaire (Lockhart, 1984). Unfortunately, despite the promised collaboration and the reminders from the Authors, only 57 sent back their forms duly filled. This 57% response rate, although disappointing, is considered largely satisfactory by the literature.

Table 1.
Respondents by region (%)

Region of origin	Part A	Part B	Respondents to B as % of A
Emilia Romagna	13	12.3	53.8
Veneto	14	10.5	42.9
Lombardia	8	7.0	50.0
Piemonte	3	5.3	100.0
Trentino-Alto Adige	4	5.3	75.0
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	1	1.8	100.0
Liguria	2	3.5	100.0
Subtotal North	*45*	*45.6*	*57.8*
Lazio	7	1.8	14.3
Toscana	5	3.5	40.0
Marche	4	7.0	100.0
Umbria	2	3.5	100.0
Subtotal Center	*18*	*15.8*	*50.0*
Sicilia	11	14.0	72.7
Puglia	10	10.5	60.0
Campania	6	5.3	50.0
Abruzzo	5	3.5	40.0
Calabria	2	1.8	50.0
Sardegna	3	3.5	66.7
Subtotal South	*37*	*38.6*	*59.5*
TOTAL	100	100,0	57.0

Since the missing answers are homogeneously spread over the Italian territory (Table 1) and also the composition by category (Table 2) has not really changed, we believe that no substantial distortion has been introduced by the pattern of missing responses in the second part of the research.

Table 2.
Respondents by category (%)

Category	Part A	Part B
Producers	40	51
Producers/Processors	31	19
Traders	15	19
Processors	14	11
TOTAL	100	100

The answers to both parts have been then transferred into a database constructed on the basis of a coding frame. For the scaling questions with five ordered levels, the Likert items are scored from 1 to 5 (1= Least important and 5= Most important; 1= Absolutely disagree and 5= Totally agree); for the binary choice questions, 0 refers to NO and 1 refers to YES. For each question, the sum of the scores given by all respondents, compared to the theoretical total amount, allows to express the group opinion as a percentage of the theoretical maximum put as equal to 100. Thanks to this procedure, the opinions are thus ranked and ordered for decreasing relevance, as in the Tables 3 and 4, which we later comment.

Since the profiling of firms belonging to the different Italian regions in terms of characteristic such as turnover, years of experience in international trade, etc., is also an important step of the analysis, further investigation of the distribution of the firms has been made through a classification tree (Breiman, Friedman, Olshen and Stan, 1984), leading to enucleate five homogeneous groups in the three macro-areas (North, Center and South) of Italy.

A classification tree algorithm (CART) is a non-parametric statistical method to construct a classifier called tree. A classifier is a rule to attribute to a unit a specific value of a categorical variable of interest, starting from information of some explanatory variables. Let Y be the variable of interest and X_1, X_2, .., X_k the set of k explanatory variables. The outcome is a number of groups, defined in terms of the explanatory variables, that are homogeneous with respect to Y. In our case Y, is the variable that describes the belonging to three Italian macro areas. We used 6 explanatory variables (so k=6) that describe the category of the firm, the 2008 turnover, the main motivation to deal with organic agriculture, the years of experience, the form of participation at the fair and the presence of financial support.

Usually the dataset is divided into a learning sample and a validation sample. The first is used to construct the tree and the second is used to validate its classification power. When the dataset has a limited number of observations, as in our case, the tree is implemented on the whole dataset and cross-validation methods are used to assess the classification power. The tree in Figure 1 is formed by implementation of the CART algorithm using the "rpart" function of the statistical software R freely available on the internet (Muenchen and Hilbe, 2010).

The construction of the tree takes form as follows. First a parent node is given, containing the whole dataset. Then two leaf nodes Tleft and Tright are built according to the so called splitting rule. Let X_j be the variable used for the split. The algorithm finds the best split of X_j by performing an exhaustive search that optimizes a node impurity criterion, in this case the Gini index (Hastie and Friedman, 2009). The algorithm performs subsequent splits of each node and generates a sequence of trees, each obtained by adding two leafs, i.e. terminal nodes, to the previous one. Unless some stopping rule is given (such as the minimum number of observations per leaf or a maximum number of leafs), the algorithm continues until the minimum possible value of the impurity criterion is reached. The unit is classified according to the splitting criteria, from the root node to the terminal node. A node is considered to belong to a given class of the response variable Y if the majority of the units in the node are in that class. The misclassification errors, i.e. the number of units that are incorrectly classified within each terminal node, are then calculated.

This first phase is followed by the so called pruning of the tree. Since a tree with too many leaves is rather unstable and performs poorly on new data, there is a trade-off between complexity of the tree and misclassification errors. Therefore, the CART algorithm performs a pruning of the tree, until the root node. Let T be the number of terminal nodes in a given tree and R(T) be the classification error. The algorithm searches for the minimum number T such that the cost-complexity function is minimized. The cost complexity function is:

$$Ra(T) = R(T) - a\,T$$

Where a is a complexity parameter, always positive. The parameters should be externally fixed. We posed it to 0.1, which is the usual choice in these exercises.

Finally, the declared willingness to participate in a future edition is considered a response variable of other potentially explanatory independent variables through a logistic regression. This is an extension of the linear regression techniques to deal with response variables that are binary (Hosmer and Lemeshow, 2000).

3 Presence of Italian Firms at BioFach

BioFach is the world leading exhibition taking place annually in February, in Germany. The BioFach trademark is owned privately and the organizers manage similar (although much smaller) events in other countries. Exhibitors expose all their products: organic foods and beverages, raw materials, semi-processed ingredients, in addition to natural textiles. There are also ecological input providers, side by side with Certification Bodies, international and national organic associations, national and international agencies. At the same time, Vivaness, the world trade fair for natural personal care and wellness, occupied a special hall in 2009 where 207 exhibitors from all over the world could present their natural products.

On its 20th edition, from 19 to 22 February 2009, there were 2,744 exhibitors, of whom almost two-thirds were not from Germany. Germany was strongly represented with 941 exhibitors, followed by Italy (394),

Spain (205), France (181) and Austria. (104). 46,771 visitors from 129 countries (38% not German) entered the fairgrounds. Many participants from developing countries always have their costs paid by some EU countries or by the Swiss Cooperation to Development, or by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Every year, BioFach also offers the opportunity to meet international experts and to attend several cultural events, workshops and press conferences about the latest developments in the organic scenario.

The Italian presence at BioFach shows a peak in 2007, when Italy was the main guest, as the "Organic Country of the Year" and the number of firms and various entities reached 303. Since then, the Italian exhibitors have decreased to 298 in 2008 and 290 in 2009. Among the Italian attendees, most belong to the three categories of producers of raw agricultural commodities, food processors and traders, with a lower number of service providers, like publishing houses, organic associations, certification bodies and others who support the products' promotion, in addition to some public bodies, such as regional and provincial governments. The products mostly offered are typically Italian, although there are small variations from one year to another. Wine is proposed by about one fifth of all companies, and a similar share proposes pasta, cereals and baked products, followed by olive oil. Fruits and vegetables, fresh and processed, are respectively promoted by about 9 and 7% of the Italian firms. Dressings (like for example organic vinegar) and sauces for pasta have slightly decreased, from 6% to 4%, while dairy products and "other beverages" are more or less stable, with a 6% share.

The relatively high cost of participation explains the fact that the number of organic firms with their own independent booth is always lower than the number of participants attending within a group. From 2006 to 2009, the number of collective participants has increased by 40.7%, while that of independent participants has augmented only by 10.7%. The collective participation in BioFach is organized by associations, companies, and cooperatives, by Italian certification bodies (like IMC, ICEA, and *Suolo e Salute* - Soil and Health) and by some regional governments. In all years, the highest number of collective participants co-exhibits in booths organized by their Regions. It is interesting to see that the number of firms organized collectively by private companies has increased, as well as the number organized by cooperatives. In 2009, there is also a strong increase of the firms whose collective presence is organized by their certification bodies.

4 Demographics and Main Findings

The responding firms are classified according to their region of origin, category, dimension of their turnover in 2008, and type of products they are promoting. Almost half of respondents come from Northern Italy, where there is a concentration of food processing companies (also in the conventional sector), with a lower relevance of firms based in the South.

The producers of raw organic commodities represent 40% of the sample (Table 2) for part A and 51% for part B, followed by the producers and processors (31 and 19%, respectively), then by the traders (15 and 19%) and by the pure processors (14 and 11%). 37% of the respondents to part A had a turnover in 2008 between 1,000,001– 100,000,000 Euros, and 21% between 500,001 – 1,000,000 Euros. The balance is represented by smaller companies, with 3% even below 20,000 Euros. Most exhibitors propose the typical Italian products: the firms selling or distributing olive oil, pasta/cereals/baked products, and wine are attending in higher number, respectively 21%, 21% and 19% of the total. A smaller number proposes other types of products and a small quantity of the companies has a new product to show, like "vegetable meat", ice cream from organic almonds, etc. Total exceeds 100 because many of the respondents have more than one category of products.

75% of firms participated in BioFach already in 2008, 62% in 2007, 54% in 2006, and 47% in 2005, while 43% started to participate in this fair even before. 37% of the firms have taken part in all the editions, whereas 63% declare a discontinuous attendance.

As expected, 43% of firms are in a collective space sponsored by public bodies, 25% are in a collective stand organized by an association or a certification body; 4% are in a collective stand sponsored by a private trader. Only 28% are alone in their own independent booth. To participate in BioFach, 40% of the firms declare to receive some sorts of financial or in-kind support (35% from public bodies, 3% by private entities and associations, and 2% from other sources). Only 24% of the Northern firms receive a support, whereas this increases to 55% in the Centre and 56% in the South. In almost all cases, the expenses covered by the support are those related to the booth, whereas the travel costs are paid only to 12% of the respondents, the board and lodging to 10%, the organization of some events within the fair to another 10%.

Table 3.
Opinions about trade shows

Rank	Opinions	Answers					
		1	2	3	4	5	Score %
1	Trade shows represent a single sales call to a broad base of customers	4	3	7	22	64	88
2	We exhibit because our customers expect us to be there	24	13	14	26	23	62
2	We reach a higher level of management among customers	22	11	21	27	19	62
4	Trade shows are conducive to networking with industry professionals	25	11	30	20	14	57
5	Trade shows are expensive relative to other marketing approaches	31	20	19	19	11	52
5	There are too many trade shows available to us in market	42	11	16	8	23	52
7	Exhibit hours are too long and, therefore, not profitable	56	16	13	6	9	39
8	The time of exhibiting creates troubles to our organization	55	14	20	7	4	38
9	We exhibit at trade shows because our competitors do	79	13	5	2	1	27

Scale 1 = Totally disagree to Scale 5 = Totally agree

80% of the respondents attend BioFach because of its specialization in the organic sector, whereas 62% look for the quality and quantity of the visitors, 44% consider the prestige of the event, 33% participate because Germany is the largest organic market in Europe, and 22% look at the time and date of the trade fair.

As found by Tanner (2002), most exhibitors affirm (Table 3) that the trade shows represent the best way to reach a large number of present and potential customers (1st rank, with total score 88 out of 100). Furthermore, thanks to the meetings taking place during the fair, the relationships with the clients can be improved, as well as the links with other operators. On the other hand, there is also a convergence of opinions on the statement that companies are to some extent "forced" to be at the fairs, because their customers expect them to be there.

Considering the above-mentioned opinions, it is obvious that out of the several activities listed by Hansen (2004) which can be implemented during the fair, to achieve different goals, (image-building, relationship-building, information gathering and motivation activities), the respondents to part A (Table 4) indicate that the "image-building activities" are the most important ones (75% of the maximum score), followed by those "relationship-building" (66%) and by the "sales-related activities" (65%). Less attention is devoted to "information gathering" (47%), and also the "motivation of personnel" is not considered very important by the respondents.

After the fair, the respondents to Part B of the questionnaire largely confirm this ranking, with the only difference being represented by "relationship-building activities", which lose some points (-13) and "staff motivation" that receives a higher score (+6.7 points).

Table 4.
Activities at Biofach 2009

Rank	Activities, by purpose	Score (max. 100)	
		At the fair	Post fair
1	Image-building	75	75
2	Relationship-building	66	53
3	Sales increasing	65	63
4	Information-gathering	47	47
5	Staff Motivation	38	45

In order to rationalise this large amount of information, seven relevant variables have been selected and recoded to proceed with a classification tree. This procedure has been chosen due to the categorical nature of the observations and the sparsity of the contingency table obtained by the cross-classification of the firms. The selected variables are the following ones, with the number of observations between brackets:

- REG: the region where the firm is located, reclassified in North (45), Centre (18) and South (37); there is one missing observation;
- CAT: the category of the firm, reclassified in Producers (40), Producers-Processors (31), Processors (14) and Traders (15);
- TURN: the 2008 turnover of the firm, reclassified in Small <100,000 € (17), Medium >100,000 and <1 million € (35), Large > 1million € (10); there are ten missing observations;
- MOTIV: the main motivation to deal with organic agriculture, reclassified in Market (33) and Environment (66);
- YEAR: the years of experience in international organic trade shows, classified in >10 years (32), <10 and >5 (33), <5 years (32);
- PART: form of participation, reclassified in Alone with own stand (27), In a group organized by private entities (29) or In a group organized by public entities (42);
- FINSUP: financial support, left as in the questionnaire, with Yes (42) and No (58).

After a careful consideration, REG has been chosen as the response variable of the classification tree, due to the different distribution of the companies in the Italian territory and the different supporting policies which have been implemented by the Regional Governments (Zanoli, 2007). By doing so, homogeneous groups are determined according to the variable REG; their characterisation in terms of the other variables is given.

The elaboration (Figure 1) shows that a first division is operated by the variable PART – Form of participation, which discriminates two subgroups, composed of 56 and 44 firms, respectively. For the first subgroup, no other variable is able to explain further subdivisions, while for the latter group, the second meaningful variable is TURN, that divides into two smaller subgroups: a subgroup of 20, that includes only the companies with Medium turnover, and a subgroup of 24, which comprises firms with both Small and Large turnover. The variables which allow further discriminations, for the two cases, are different: in the first case, the variable CAT divides again into two final categories of ten firms each, whereas in the second case, it is the variable FINSUP that allows a final division.

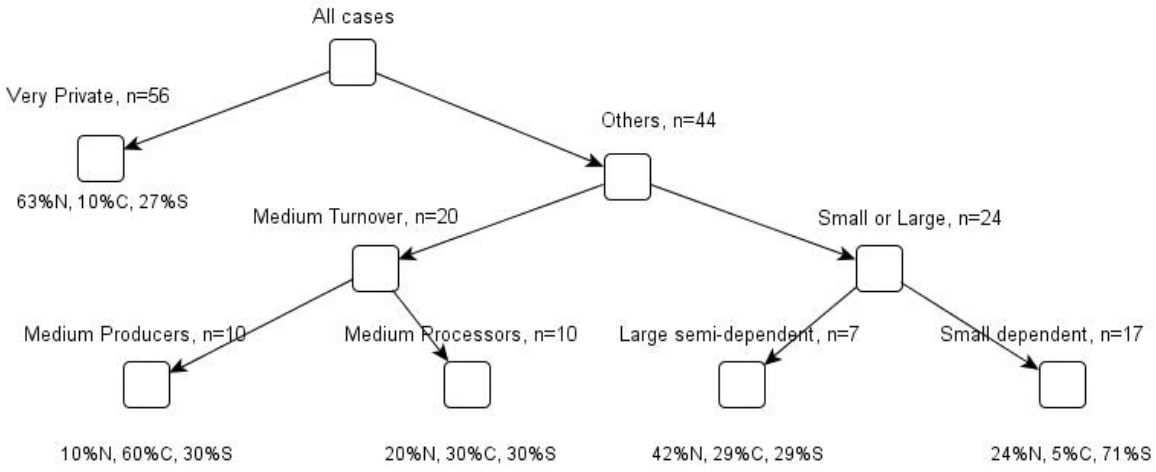

Figure 1. Classification tree of firms

Two of the seven selected potentially explanatory variables are not discriminatory and do notlead to any other sub-grouping: they are EXP = the years of experience in international fairs and MOTIV = the main reason to deal with organic produce.

The elaboration allows grouping the Italian firms participating in Biofach 2009 into five distinct categories:

1. The *Very private*: 56 cases, which participate with their own stand or share a common space organized by private operators (Traders, Certification Bodies), mostly located in the Northern regions of the country;
2. The *Medium-sized producers*: ten cases of producers with medium turnover in a common space organized by public bodies, mostly located in the Centre;
3. The *Medium processors*: ten cases of processors and producers-processors, with medium turnover in a common space organized by public bodies, mostly located in the South;
4. The *Large semi-dependent*: seven firms without any financial support, sharing a common space organized by a public body; the majority of which is in the North;
5. The *Small dependant*: 17 cases with financial support from a public institution, sharing a common space organized by a public body, mostly located in the South.

One month after the fair, the best results declared by most respondents confirm the firm's position in the German market (60%), the acquisition of new non German clients and a better knowledge of the market dynamics. Several other achievements are also mentioned by the respondents, with the lowest result received by the "opportunity to attend conferences and debates". No doubt that these salespeople do not

have much spare time for such activities, but it is an opportunity lost for the better knowledge of the market itself.

Of the respondents to Part B of the questionnaire, only three (6.1%) declare that they have not acquired any new client, with a similar number affirming to have acquired more than 12 new clients. Most firms indicate between one and six.

Table 5.
Level of satisfaction (%) by category

Categories	Fully	50-50	Not at all	Total
Producers	79.3	17.2	3.4	100.0
Producers/Processors	63.6	27.3	9.1	100.0
Traders	81.8	18.2	0.0	100.0
Processors	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
TOTAL	78.9	17.5	3.5	100.0

79% of companies (Table 5) express their general level of satisfaction, compared to a tiny minority (3.5%) which has not achieved their expected results. The lowest level of full satisfaction (63.6%) can be found in the "producers-processors" category, the group including farmers who also have some on-farm processing, while the highest satisfaction is expressed by the pure processors, the food firms which purchase organic ingredients to elaborate organic foods.

Another motivation for the relatively lower level of satisfaction is the lack of experience and the consequently weak preparation. Those firms participating for the first time are not very satisfied by their first attendance in BioFach, whereas the highest levels of satisfaction are declared by 86% of the companies with more than six years of international experiences. These companies are very well conscious about how to prepare for the participation, to avoid or minimize risks or mistakes, and to maximize the returns.

Most respondents to part B, one month after BioFach, have a positive opinion regarding the Italian participation in the BioFach 2009 fair. Only a modest 5.3% says that there was a very good coordination, and 66.7% consider the Italian participation well coordinated. On the other hand, a relevant minority (26.3%) considers that the Italian presence has been poorly coordinated. Just one company says that the Italian coordination was absolutely poor.

75.4% of the respondents are also positive about their future participation in BioFach, with 22.8% of indecision and only one respondent with a clear negative decision. When cross-analyzing with the category of the companies, 31% of the primary producers are not yet sure about their decision. Almost all other companies, belonging to the categories of producers/processors, traders and processors, have decided that they will attend the same exhibition next year, and only a small number is still not sure. When this willingness to participate is statistically analyzed, through a series of univariate logistic regression, versus six independent variables (satisfaction from present edition, availability of financial support, class of turnover, region of the company, form of participation and experiences abroad), the results (Table 6) show that there is no significant connection between most of these variables with the decision to take part in the next edition of BioFach. The only meaningful relationship appears with the overall satisfaction, which has a P-value of 0.019, meaning that the participation in the next edition of the fair is only affected by the overall satisfaction from the previous edition.

Table 6.
Decision to participate in the next edition

Independent variables	P-value
Satisfaction from present edition	0.019
Financial support	0.417
Class of turnover	0.511
Region of company	0.613
Form of participation	0.686
Experiences abroad	0.957
P value meaningful if <0.05	

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This research indicates that the participation in international trade fairs remains an important marketing tool for organic food companies wishing to confirm and / or to expand their presence in the global market. Food firms of various sizes believe that thanks to the presence in trade fairs their sales can be expanded and the quality of relationships with their clients can be improved. Specifically, thanks to the participation in BioFach 2009, most companies have confirmed their position in the German and other North European markets, and have increased their sales, to both old and new German and non German clients. Other intangible results can be the better knowledge of the market dynamics, and the acquisition of ideas for new products.

As suggested by literature, most firms, namely those with longer experience in international fair trade, properly prepare their participation, with several pre-fair activities (production of information materials, videos, personal letters to customers, advertising, etc.) and some companies also organize on-fair events. On the other hand, all these activities and the other running expenses (rent of space, travel, board and lodging for staff, use of local staff, etc.) represent a heavy load, especially for young, small and medium size firms, which find almost impossible an individual participation in an independent booth. For these companies, public financial supports and some guidance for a collective presence remain essential, to limit and share the costs, as well as to get the most from the fair. In the Italian case, this is particularly true for the firms based in Southern Italy, where size is smaller and experience is lower than for the firms based in Northern Italy.

Beside public bodies, it is worth noticing that collective presence of small and medium firms is increasingly organized by organic associations and by private, profit looking firms: this finding is very interesting, since it confirms that market forces can stimulate the growth of the organic sector, beside and even more than public intervention.

This research has also found that the companies participating for the first time in BioFach show the less positive results and the lowest levels of satisfaction, linked to poor preparation, planning and training of personnel. Consequently, another finding is that, in case of firms without previous international experience, financial support is not sufficient. Newcomers should be better advised about how to organize for the exhibition and how to act during the fair. More attention should be paid to the pre-fair activities at home and to the training of personnel sent to the international fairs, in terms of languages, attitudes, behavior with customers and potential clients.

Finally, last but not least, in our case there is also room for improving the overall Italian coordination, among the regional governments, with the Ministry of Agriculture and with the Italian Trade Commission, for a more numerous attendance by Italian firms and more effective promotion of the Italian products worldwide.

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