AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC PROFILES OF SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED HOTELS IN THE ALPS

Federica Buffa

eTourism Research Group

Department of Computer and Management Sciences - University of Trento (Italy)
federica.buffa@economia.unitn.it

ABSTRACT
The aim of the PhD Thesis was to study the strategic development and the forms of relationships that exist among small- and medium-sized hotel enterprises (SMTEs). This business category was chosen as the object of study because of its importance within the tourist offering (Rispoli, Tamma 1995; Kožak, Rimigton 1998). The research looks specifically at small- and medium-sized hotels in Alpine regions, given that in these destinations the predominant business category is made up of autonomous SMTEs which are family-run and whose development is deeply rooted in the territory and in the local community (Tschurtschenthaler 2000, Keller 2004). Despite the numerical importance of SMTEs, the academic research has thus far focused mainly on large businesses (Quinn et al. 1992; Thomas 1998), thereby leaving a knowledge gap with regard to the structural, strategic and managerial characteristics of SMTEs (Friel 1999; Page et al. 1999).

The study of the different paths of development among hotel businesses in Alpine regions from the mid-1700s to the present (Leonardi 2000; Battilani 2001; Bartaletti 2004; Bätzing 2005) shows on one hand the importance of the territory’s natural resources as an attractive feature of the tourist offering, and on the other the ability of the local community to take advantage of increasing flows in tourist demand and to improvise business activities (spontaneous professionalization, Nocifora 2001), by investing local resources (financial and real estate) and setting up an accommodations sector. An analysis of the path of development over time has found that spontaneity and individualism are prevalent in business activities and are distinctive elements of the birth and development of hotels and other tourist businesses in these regions.

In light of the increasing complexity of the sector since the 1990s and the limits endemic to the small size of the businesses, we maintain that the reactive strategy (Miles and Snow 1978) that these businesses have adopted until now is not sufficient to maintain their competitiveness in the medium and long term; that is, they are not able, alone, to offer the increasingly articulated and complex tourist offering that a large segment of the tourist market demands (Smeral 1998, Martini 2002, Pomfret 2004).

The thesis focused on the contents of the development strategies and paths of these enterprises, with particular attention to the dynamics of relationships (the nature, intensity, purpose and depth) that hotels develop with other local actors within the same competitive environment (Porter 1985; Rispoli 2002). Emphasis was given to the study of whether the behaviour of the businesses is the result of their entrepreneurial spontaneity or of a process whereby they have deliberately taken certain strategic decisions from a more informed standpoint (Mintzberg, Waters 1985). The latter would allow them to channel emerging ideas into a stronger and more defined strategy for the medium and long term. The aim of the analysis of inter-business relationships was to identify business profiles that are distinct from the individualistic pattern followed by some enterprises, and as such are oriented towards forming and maintaining relationships with other businesses.

The research foresaw two lines of analysis: a study and discussion of the theoretical framework and field research in the Alpine regions of Italy and Switzerland. In order to fill the knowledge gap regarding the SMTEs, some schemes and contributions from the specialist literature in the tourist sector have been added, along with some tools and models of analysis coming from the literature on manufacturing enterprises, with specific reference to the study of small business systems (Piore, Sabel...
1984; Bagnasco 1986; Becattini 1987; Brusco 1989). This phase of the research resulted in the identification of the taxonomy that made it possible to identify the hotels in these Alpine regions based on size, and also in the framework through which to study inter-business relations.

The field research was done in two phases: a quantitative study with the administration of 500 online questionnaires to a representative sampling of Italian and Swiss hoteliers, and a qualitative analysis with 95 in-depth interviews to a random sample of hoteliers from among those who received the online questionnaire.

The results from the quantitative research were analyzed through frequency distributions, thereby making it possible to identify specific characteristics such as assets, strategies and relationships. Where differences among frequencies in the two samples were more evident, tests were conducted that compared the proportion with degrees of significance (α) equal to 0.01, 0.05, 0.1. The data were then elaborated using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Grenacre 1993) to identify some profiles of businesses that are distinguishable by the strategic content and by the forms of their inter-business relationships. The results of this phase were explored further during the in-depth interviews.

The research identified some profiles of the SMTEs, which were then mapped and differentiated by geographic area and by size with reference to their assets (elementary assets vs. structured assets), the strategic content (entrepreneurial spontaneity vs. development of a deliberate strategy), and the search for strategic options that required collective cooperation at the destination level (individualism vs. relationships among businesses).

The results have provided useful information from which future studies can look further at SMTEs in Alpine regions. Moreover they provide the information required for a comparison with the strategic-managerial paths of development seen in businesses in other destinations where the structure of the offering is largely fragmented.

### 1. AIMS AND FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH

The tourist sector is characterized by a marked duality (Keller 2004) in which a limited number of large businesses, which provide their offering through tourist intermediaries, exist alongside numerous small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMTEs) that offer products and services to tourists who tend to organize their own vacations without the help of an intermediary (do-it-yourself tourists). Despite the numerical importance of SMTEs, which are located mostly in industrialized nations with traditionally important tourist sectors, the academic research has thus far focused mainly on large businesses (Quinn et al. 1992; Thomas 1998), such as airline companies in the transport sector, tour operators and travel agencies in the distribution channel, and hotel chains and groups in the accommodations sector (see, for example, the studies of Middleton 1991; Dunnig, McQuenn 1982; Burgess et al. 1995; Mountio et al. 1995). The limited attention to the study of SMTEs that characterized academic research until the end of the 1980s left a knowledge gap with regard to the structural, strategic and managerial characteristics of SMTEs (Friel 1999; Page et al. 1999). Thomas (1998 and 2000) underlines the presence of this gap and emphasizes the need to undertake further study of these areas since SMTEs are a unique category for analysis and have their own features which need separate study. Friel (1999) and Morrison (1998a) strengthen this consideration, indicating that by virtue of their unique characteristics, SMTEs cannot be considered simply smaller versions of large enterprises.

In light of these considerations, the aim of the PhD Thesis was to study the strategic development and forms of relationships that exist among small- and medium-sized hotel enterprises. This business category was chosen as the object of study because of its importance within the tourist offering (Rispoli, Tamma 1995; Kozak, Rimington 1998). The research looks specifically at small- and medium-sized hotels in Alpine regions. In these destinations the predominant business category is made up of SMTEs which are family-run and whose development is deeply rooted in the territory and in the local community (Tscharutschenthaler 2000; Keller 2004). In the Alps, the study of the hotel sector is of particular interest because it represents the first type of business connected to the tourist sector that
also involves the local community (Battilani 2001) and in many communities is the first type of business that has developed (Bätzing 2005). The study of the different paths of development among hotel businesses in Alpine regions from the mid-1700s to the present (Leonardi 2000; Battilani 2001; Bartaletti 2004; Bätzing 2005) shows on one hand the importance of the territory’s natural resources as an attractive feature of the tourist offering, and on the other the ability of the local community to take advantage of increasing flows in tourist demand and to improvise business activities (spontaneous professionalization as defined in Nocifora 2001), by investing local resources (financial and real estate) and setting up an accommodations sector.

In the current phase the slowdown in development started in the previous phase has continued, but small and large hotel businesses have availed themselves of distinct resources and competencies that have allowed them to face the ever-growing complexities of the market and to adopt new strategies. The large hotels have faced decreases in business alongside other operators and infrastructures that exist in the large ski areas. The search for strategic-managerial solutions is not, in these cases, the direct responsibility of the business, but of the holding company that manages the entire destination from an economic-business logic, (defined as a corporate destination as indicated in Bieger 1998; Flagestad, Hope 2001). The resources (financial, human and technological) and strategic management tools that the large enterprise has available, are not comparable to the limited resources of the small, family-run hotel. The latter benefits from its flexibility and ability to absorb negative market trends by using its own capital and having a flexible workforce (fixed and seasonal), but is autonomous and independent from businesses with developed strategic-managerial skills and large financial resources.

We suppose that the reactive strategy (Miles, Snow 1978) that SMTEs have adopted until now is not sufficient to maintain their competitiveness in the medium and long term; that is they are not able, alone, to offer an increasingly articulated and complex tourist offering that a large segment of the tourist market demands (Smeral 1998; Martini 2002; Pomfret 2004).

The analysis of the path of development over time has found that the spontaneity and the individualism, the two main areas of focus in this research, are prevalent in business activities and are distinctive elements of the birth and development of hotels and other tourist businesses in Alpine regions. The thesis analyzes the contents of the development strategies, with particular attention to the dynamics of relationships that hotels develop with other local actors within the same competitive environment.

The first phase of the research studied the phenomenon of entrepreneurial spontaneity. The analysis set out to discover whether there were profiles of businesses that differ according to the content of their strategies and if these strategies are influenced by their different structural assets (Focus 1: entrepreneurial spontaneity vs. the development of a deliberated strategy). Also considered at this point was whether businesses tend to deal with market changes with short-term actions (entrepreneurial spontaneity) or if they undertake processes that lead to more informed and deliberated strategies (Mintzberg, Waters 1985) that tend to be long-term. Also observed in this regard were the decisions made regarding promotion and commercialization of the business and the way in which the business uses its own resources; this was done by analyzing a) the adoption of marketing policies in relations with clients, b) the use of ICT in operative activities and to support the business strategies, and c) the participation in collective activities or associations at the destination level.

The second focus of the research looked more in-depth at the issue of entrepreneurial individualism. Particular emphasis was given to whether profiles exist of businesses that can be differentiated by how they initiate relationships with the other actors that contribute to defining the offering (Focus 2: entrepreneurial individualism vs. forms of relationships among businesses). To this end the analysis considered whether these businesses make full use of their own resources and competencies (autonomy) or whether they collaborate with other actors to develop an offering at the destination level. The thesis looked specifically at the nature and intensity of such relationships, the reasons for collaboration among actors and the extension of existing networks. In this logic the socio-cultural
dimension in which the businesses operate was also considered to see whether and how it influences collaborative inter-business relationships.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research foresaw two lines of analysis: the theoretical framework and field research in the Alpine regions of Italy and Switzerland. In order to fill the knowledge gap regarding the SMTEs, some schemes and contributions from the specialist literature in the tourist sector have been added, along with some tools and models of analysis coming from the literature on manufacturing enterprises, with specific reference to the study of small business systems (Piore, Sabel 1984; Bagnasco 1986; Becattini 1987; Brusco 1989). This phase of the research resulted in the identification of the taxonomy that made it possible to identify the hotels in the Alpine regions based on size (see par. 2.1) and also in the framework through which to study inter-business relations (see par. 2.2). The field research was done in two phases: a quantitative study with the administration of 500 online questionnaires to a representative sample of Italian and Swiss hoteliers, and a qualitative analysis with 95 in-depth interviews to a random sample of hoteliers from among those who received the online questionnaire (see par. 2.3).

2.1 Taxonomy of small- and medium-sized hotels. The criteria adopt to identify SMTEs in Alpine destinations.

There is not homogeneous thinking nor shared criteria regarding how to define and which criteria should be used to identify SMTEs and small hotels (Peacock 1993; Morrison 1998b; Thomas 1998 and 2000; Page et al. 1999; Dall’Ara et al. 2000). This situation exists in the academic and in the legislative fields. The classification based on size of businesses as laid out by the European Community (2003/361/EC) shows the limitations of this framework as applied to businesses in the tourist sector. The indicators proposed have the advantage of referring to quantitative parameters (staff headcount, balance sheet and annual turnover) and therefore of being objective in their classification yet are limited by the excessive generalizations found in the legislation. If this classification can be used to identify large hotel chains, tour operators or airline companies that operate in the tourist sector, it has been found inadequate in identifying SMTEs. With respect to these businesses, in fact, it is not always possible to defer to official data regarding staff headcount. The European Commission, moreover, provides no indications regarding how to count year-round and seasonal workers, both categories which are of particular importance in the tourist sector (especially among family-run SMTEs).

The study of the strategic-managerial development of the small- and medium sized hotels in Alpine regions required first that these businesses be identified based on their size: small, medium or large. To do this, the indications coming from the Italian and European norms and legislation and from international and national academic studies were taken into consideration. The findings emerging from this study are described below.

- The current Italian Law on Tourism (Law 135/2001, Reform of the national legislation on tourism) does not classify hotels according to size. To have information regarding size it is necessary to consult the previous legislation on tourism, Law 227 of 1983. It delegates to the regional governments the responsibility for establishing the parameters for classifying businesses and is limited to defining minimum requirements that an accommodations structure must have to be considered a “hotel.” Among these requirements, only one refers to size - the accommodations capacity of the hotel. For a structure to be considered a “hotel” it must have at least seven rooms.¹

¹ The Law 227/1983, comma 3, defines the minimum requirements that a structure must have to be classified as a hotel. Besides an accommodations capacity of no less than seven rooms, the structure must have: at least one lavatory for each ten beds, a sink with hot and cold running water for each room, a common room, technological plants, and an adequate number and quality of staff to serve and run the structure.
At a national level there is no homogeneity in classification criteria and no standard taxonomy to define SMTEs (neither at a general level nor for the accommodations sector).

- The Community Directive 95/57/CE disciplines the gathering and publication by the Statistics offices of member states of data regarding accommodations and tourist flows that must be communicated to Eurostat. The aim is to compare at a European level the data regarding tourist demand and offering. As for the hotels, also in this case the only quantitative parameter to identify these structures is the number of rooms, and further criteria are not established that serve to define small, medium or large hotels. Currently it is up to each member state to determine the number of rooms that a structure must have to be considered a hotel. No homogeneous classification system exists to define size apart from the number of rooms.

- At a national level, the academic contributions in which there has been a more in-depth look at the issues regarding classification of hotels and where some taxonomies have been proposed to consider other aspects of size and management are found in Rispoli and Tamma (1991 and 1995). The classifications proposed nonetheless on one hand do not indicate quantitative parameters that differentiate SMTEs and large businesses (Table 1), and on the other set forth a taxonomy that appears to be inadequate in differentiating the SMTEs in Alpine regions (Table 2). Based on this second classification, in fact, a “small” hotel must have fewer than 25 rooms, a “medium-sized” hotel can have up to 150 rooms. The hotels in mountain areas in Italy have, on average, 20.7 rooms (www.istat.it, see year 2003). The adoption of the classification scheme proposed by the two authors therefore does not make it possible to distinguish the businesses into more precise categories, since the vast majority would be considered small.

- At an international level, it is principally the contributions of Thomas (1998 and 2000) that bring to light the absence of a common taxonomy to study SMTEs. This gap is amplified by a number of academic contributions that propose different classification schemes that use diverse parameters. Among these, the accommodation capacity if the most frequently used. The authors do not agree, however, regarding the use of the number of rooms or the number of beds, and moreover there is no shared threshold number to establish size (Table 3a). A qualitative indicator is sometimes considered alongside the accommodation capacity. In this case it is most common to refer to the type of management policies pursued, and for the small hotel whether management is done by the owner and/or family (see Pickering et al. 1971; Lee-Ross, Ingold 1994; Morrison 1998b). Another frequently used indicator is the number of staff, but also in this case there is no shared criteria to classify the hotel according to this parameter (Table 3b) and it is not possible to distinguish between full-time and seasonal workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of management</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Entrepreneur</th>
<th>Managerial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directive functions</td>
<td>Owner and family members (extended family)</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Manager professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive functions</td>
<td>Owner and family members (extended family)</td>
<td>Staff that have no family relationship with the entrepreneur</td>
<td>Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operative units</td>
<td>Single unit</td>
<td>Single unit</td>
<td>Single unit or multi-unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Small and large</td>
<td>Large-size chains and groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: our elaboration of Rispoli, Tamma (1991)
### Tab.2: Classification of hotel businesses and hotels based on size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Large</th>
<th>Very large</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Room</strong></td>
<td>7 - 25</td>
<td>&lt; 25</td>
<td>26 - 120</td>
<td>121 - 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff</strong></td>
<td>&lt; 20</td>
<td>20 - 100</td>
<td>&gt; 100</td>
<td>not indicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operative unit</strong></td>
<td>Single unit</td>
<td>Single unit or multi-unit</td>
<td>Multi-unit</td>
<td>Multi-unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: our elaboration of Rispoli, Tamma (1991)

### Tab.3: Classification of hotel businesses based on accommodations capacity (3a) and number of staff (3b)

#### Tab.3a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/s</th>
<th>Classification based on accommodations capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Bastakis et al. (2004) | 1-20 rooms: family hotel  
1-10 rooms: small hotel  
21-50 rooms: small hotel  
51-100 rooms: medium-sized hotel  
> 100 rooms: large hotel    |
| Camisón (2000)    | 1-100 beds: family hotel  
101-150 beds: small hotel  
151-300 beds: medium-sized hotel  
> 300 beds: large hotel    |
| Halcro et al. (1998) | < 15 rooms: small hotel                                    |
| Sungard et al. (1998) | < 25 rooms: small hotel                                    |
| Morrison (1994)   | < 50 rooms: small hotel                                    |
| Mountinho (1990)  | < 50 rooms: small hotel                                    |

#### Tab.3b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/s</th>
<th>Classification based on number of staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friel (1999)</td>
<td>Reference to the number of staff foreseen by the EC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horobin, Long (1996)**</td>
<td>&lt; 10 staff: micro-business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radven, Lucas (1996)**</td>
<td>&lt; 25 staff: small hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowson, Lucas (1998)</td>
<td>&lt; 25 staff: small hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hales et al. (1996)**</td>
<td>&lt; 50 staff: small business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas et al. (1997)</td>
<td>&lt; 50 staff: small business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacock (1993)</td>
<td>&lt; 80 staff: small hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Source: our elaboration

The desk analysis shows the absence of homogeneity in the choice of criteria to classify the hotel businesses and underlines the inadequacies in the taxonomies proposed to distinguish Alpine hotels (ref. supra Istat). In these regions the hotels are small and would also be considered small by international standards. In order to determine whether the SMEs have a diverse strategic profile it was decided to define a taxonomy that considers a) the unique features of the alpine territory, b) the accommodations capacity of the structure (number of rooms), and c) the type of business management approach. The unique features of the alpine territory influence the size categories defined according to the accommodations capacity of the hotel. The type of management affects the value that is attributed to the different classification criteria, since the family-based management approach helps to explain the reduced size of the business. To identify the size categories, consideration was given to the average number of rooms in hotels in the Alpine regions in Italy and Switzerland. With reference to the regional data it was found that the lowest average accommodations capacity (about 15 rooms) is in Alto Adige (Italy) and eastern Switzerland. The highest accommodations capacity was found in Trentino (Italy) and Grisons (Switzerland), with up to 30 rooms. In light of this data, the “small” hotels were identified as those with 15 or fewer rooms, “medium-sized” businesses have between 16 and 30 rooms, while “large” hotel businesses have over 30 rooms.

### 2.2 The framework adopt to study inter-business relationships in Alpine destinations

The study of forms of relationships referred to the contributions from the network approach (Håkansson 1987 and 1989; Håkansson, Snehota 1989) to identify the dimensions that characterize the
network and the specific forces that make it work. The thesis looked at four issues in particular: a) the nature of relationships, looking at the collaborative and competitive dimensions that coexist and favour the reinforcement of existing links and the birth of new relationships; b) the intensity of relationships, looking specifically at the frequency of collaborative activities among businesses and the presence of nodes or particularly strong areas within the network; c) the extension of relationships, looking at the numbers and location of actors involved in the network; and d) the reason for the relationship, looking at whether the relationship is entered into in order to promote or commercialize the offering, or even to work together to define it.

The analysis of inter-business relations required the identification of categories of actors in the competitive environment in which Alpine SMTEs operate. To this end a framework was adopted that considers and integrates contributions and schemes of analysis that come from other studies of the different levels of competition in which the SMTEs operate (Buhalis, Cooper 1998; Tschurtschenthaler 2000; Tamma 2002); of the Porter five forces analysis (Porter 1985; Rispoli 2002) and studies of the socio-cultural dimension that characterizes the atmosphere where SMEs operate in industrial districts in order to study relationships between the business and the territory (Franchi, Rieser 1991).

The SMTE is subject to multiple levels of competition that have different categories of actors from diverse destinations. In this logic the environment in which the business operates is not made up only of different categories of actors that produce the same product in the same destination but is broader (Buhalis, Cooper 1998). On one hand there is the competition among businesses within the same circumscribed area (local competition) and on the other, expanding the viewpoint of the analysis, it can be observed that competition first involves the destinations and then the single businesses, whether the destinations are similar or different, or just emerging (global competition). The passage from local to global competition is a function of the territorial area considered in Tamma (2002). In this sense also the contribution of Tshurtschethaler (2000, p.13) can be used given that it underlines the existence of problems of coordination among actors for the definition of an integrated offering, not only within the destination but also among destinations of “diverse areas.” Tshurtschethaler refers to a “structure of concentric rings of destinations of different sizes” which can even be in competition with each other.

In light of these observations it can be said that in general the competition among businesses and destinations manifests itself most frequently in two ways: at the intra-destination level in which businesses, specifically the hotel SMEs, are in competition with each other, and at the inter-destination level, where competition among businesses from different destinations is less clear and involves more than two destinations. The thesis focused on intra-destination competition, the relationships that businesses develop with other potential competitors and actors within the destination.

To identify the categories of actors with whom the hotel can activate relationships, the decision was made to use the Porter five forces analysis with the addition of “regulators” and the “businesses that offer complementary products” (Rispoli 2002). In particular, the study looked at:

- Direct competitors: the other hotels that operate in the destination.
- Producers of complementary goods and services: the other businesses within the destination that offer products and services apart from accommodations but that complement the tourist offering. In light of the categories of businesses developed in the diverse evolutionary phases of Alpine tourism (par. 1) and the indications that have emerged from previous studies conducted in the Alps (Franch et al. 2001; Martini 2002) these actors were identified with the shop owners, restaurant owners, ski-lift operators, ski schools and other sports facilities.
- Suppliers of food products and furnishings: the inclusion of this category stems from the importance of these actors as producers of typical local products and contributors to the uniqueness of the Alpine tourist offering.
- Client: the end users of the product (tourists) and customers of hotels (tour operators and travel agencies).

- Regulators: the “diverse institutional, public and private actors that to differing degrees are responsible for decisions and developing policies that affect the structure and evolution of the competition in a particular market or sector” (Rispoli 2002, p.188). The research analyzed in particular the relationships that the hotel business engages in with the Regional Tourist Boards (RTBs) and local public institutions. Previous studies (Franch, Martini 2003) revealed the importance of these actors (in particular the RTBs) that according to the local laws and juridical forms (public or private), have the function of supporting businesses, influencing to differing degrees the definition, promotion and commercialization of the tourist offering.

The analysis of relationships that the hotel has with other actors made it possible to verify whether the hotel looks for forms of collaboration that gives it access to resources it otherwise does not have and also for ways to be a part of an offering that is much larger than the offering that the individual business can provide alone (Focus 2).

Considering the characteristics of the SMTEs in Alpine destinations, and the importance of the unique local features and attractions in the definition of the tourist offering, the thesis analyzed also the relationships that businesses form with the territory. Consideration was also given to whether within the destination there exists an interaction between the social and economic dimensions. To this end academic contributions were considered which deal with small business systems, in particular in industrial districts (Franchi, Rieser 1991)\(^2\) in order to see whether also in Alpine regions economic and social factors combine to influence the competitive dynamic. These authors note that the sense of belonging to the territory and the existence of a shared culture and outlook favour collaboration and processes of communication among actors who are often linked through family relationships. The shared language and values foster spontaneous, informal processes of relationship building and strengthen the ties among businesses. The respect for the implicit rules of behaviour (habits and social norms) also extends the sense of mutual trust, respect and friendship present in the social sphere to economic activities, favouring cooperation. The thesis analyzed whether the presence of these socio-cultural factors influences the forms of relationships found among SMTEs and local stakeholders and reveals a more articulated and defined path of strategic development that is different from development oriented towards entrepreneurial spontaneity (Focus 1). The research looked at whether within the destination there is a sense among hoteliers of belonging to the territory, along with shared behaviours and customs that have been consolidated in relationships among actors and which favour collaboration and shared participation in projects and activities that define, promote and commercialize - one or all of these activities - an articulated tourist offering. This analysis makes it possible to describe the “atmosphere” in which the business operators operate, in other words, the “climate” that characterizes the competitive dynamic.

2.3 The field research

The field research focused on hotels in Alpine tourist municipalities in Switzerland and Italy that have an email address. The decision to consider the existence of an email address as a distinguishing feature of the target population is related to the aim of the thesis (to study the use of ICT among the SMTEs) and the choice of tool (online questionnaire) used for the quantitative research (phase 1 of the field research).

In Italian Alpine destinations, the quantitative research was conducted during the summer of 2003 in the regions of Alto Adige, Trentino, Veneto (only the Province of Belluno), Piemonte and Valle d’Aosta. A total of 2,643 hotels met the criteria for inclusion in the research. From this population a

\(^2\) In their paper, these authors make explicit reference to and summarize some fundamental concepts which are present, in particular, in the works of Becattini (1987) and Dei Ottati (1987).
sampling of 300 hotels was randomly selected to receive the online questionnaire, which had a redemption rate of 82.7%.

The research in Swiss Alpine areas was conducted in the summer of 2005 in collaboration with the Institute for Public Services and Tourism at the University of St. Gallen. The regions included in the study were Grisons, Valais, Bernese Oberland, Eastern Switzerland (cantons of St.Gallen, Appenzell Innerhoden and Ausserrhoden) and Central Switzerland (cantons of Lucerne, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden and Uri). A sampling of 200 hotels was extracted from the population of 1,070 that met the criteria for the research. The redemption rate for the questionnaire was 38%.

The quantitative research provided some information regarding a) the size, organizational and managerial characteristics of the businesses, b) the strategic content of the business, with particular attention to the policies regarding online and offline commercialization, and c) the nature and intensity of relationships among hotels and other actors within the competitive environment.

The results from the quantitative research were analyzed through frequency distributions, thereby making it possible to identify specific characteristics such as assets, strategies and relationships. Where differences among frequencies in the two samples were more evident, tests were conducted that compared the proportion with degrees of significance (α) equal to 0.01, 0.05, 0.1. The data from the Swiss hotels were then elaborated using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (Grenacre 1993) to identify some profiles of businesses that are distinguishable by the strategic content and by the forms of their inter-business relationships.

The results of the quantitative analysis were explored further during the in-depth interviews with the hotelkeepers. The qualitative research (step 2) was conducted in the summer of 2005 in the Italian Alpine regions and in the summer 2006 in the Swiss Alps. The number of interviews was determined by considering methodological aspects (further study of empirical evidence emerging in previous studies) and by organizational aspects (the greater amount of time necessary to conduct direct as opposed to online interviews). In light of these considerations, it was decided to extract for the in-depth, direct interviews a random sample of the hotels that had participated in the first phase of the research. The number to interview was set at 65 for the Italian regions and 30 in the Swiss regions of Grisons, Valais and Bernese Oberland. In Italy there were 63 respondents (redemption rate of 97%) and in Switzerland there were 21 (redemption rate of 70%).

The qualitative research looked specifically at the structural and organizational characteristics of the hotels, the strategic choices made by the businesses regarding promotion and commercialization, and how they use ICT for these activities. As for the forms of relationships, specific attention was given to the purpose and the breadth of the network of inter-business relationships and the characteristics of the competitive dynamic.

The following section describes the main results of the thesis, highlighting the aspects of strategy and relationships that differentiate these businesses from a geographic viewpoint (Italy and Switzerland) and in terms of size (small, medium-sized and large businesses).

3. MAIN RESULTS

3.1 Size and organizational features of the hotels

Most hotels in Alpine regions were opened sometime between the 1960s and the mid-1980s (the third stage of tourist development in the Alps) with the advent of mass tourism. They are mostly single-unit, small, family-run businesses. Some differences exist, however, between the Alpine hotels in Italy and in Switzerland in terms of how they developed and the characteristics of their structures.

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3 It was decided to conduct the interviews in these regions because they had a higher redemption rate during the quantitative phase of the research.

4 For a detailed presentation of the research results, see Buffa (2007).
As for the birth of the businesses, nearly 30% of the Swiss hotels were opened during the period of Belle époque and several were already in operation before the 1880s (about 14%, and in Italy about 6.4%). The research found that in Switzerland hotels have developed earlier than in other Alpine areas, specifically, in Italy. In this country most hotels opened principally during the period between the two world wars and, to a greater degree than in Switzerland, during the third stage of Alpine development (19% growth). From the mid-1980s the development of hotels in the two areas follows generally parallel trends.

Regarding their assets, the greatest differences between the hotels in Italy and Switzerland are found in their juridical nature, numbers, type of staff and in their organizational structure. Less marked differences can be seen in their size and management approach.

In Switzerland hotels are generally larger in size. Most have over 15 rooms and can be nearly equally distributed between the categories of medium-sized (16-30 rooms) and large-sized hotel (over 30 rooms) (Table 4). In Italy, instead, most hotel have between 16 and 30 rooms (Table 4). While there are not extreme differences between the two areas (an aspect confirmed by the results of tests too), these results, together with the structural data indicated by the National Statistics Institutes, show that in tourist Alpine areas in Switzerland the businesses tend to be larger than businesses with the same characteristics in Italy. Moreover, while the differences between Swiss and Italian Alpine hotels are not particularly marked, there is a greater tendency among the Swiss hotels to be part of a large chain or group of hotels. Interviews with Swiss hotels revealed that the strategy of pursuing growth by adhering to large hotel chains or groups is not necessarily synonymous with satisfaction. These businesses complain, in fact, about excessive pressure from the corporate entity to impose standardization and to give priority to the interests of the corporation rather than the individual hotel, which suffers from limits to its autonomy and attention as an individual business.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tab. 4: Size of hotels in the two Alpine areas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 15 rooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>16-30 rooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 30 rooms</td>
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</table>

*Source: our elaboration*

The current juridical nature of the hotel businesses is clearly different in these Alpine areas. In Switzerland the numbers of individually-owned (39%) and corporations (39%) are equal, while in Italy the number of individually-owned businesses (68%) is the largest category, but also the family-run business is significant (14%), a category that is nearly absent in Switzerland.

The number of workers is another indicator of the small size of the hotels (Figure 1). The permanent staff in both places is under ten in hotels in both countries, but the average number in the two countries is different. In Switzerland the average number of permanent workers is 9.1, while in Italy it is 5.6. In Italy it is more common to have a maximum of ten permanent staff than it is in Switzerland, where over 20% of the hotels have between 11 and 20 permanent workers. These differences are underlined by the results of the tests, where significant differences emerged (with \( \alpha \) equal to 0.01) for the size thresholds of up to 20 staff.

The research found that in both countries the use of temporary staff is frequent and usually means employing between 1 and 10 temporary workers. In Switzerland, the higher number of full-time staff is accompanied by lower numbers of seasonal, temporary staff. These businesses have an average of 9.4 temporary workers while in Italy the average is 7.4. In Switzerland the number of hotels that have no temporary staff is double the number in Italy. Also emerging alongside the data on higher permanent staff numbers is the fact that Swiss hotels tend to be larger and more stable businesses than are found in Italy. The aspects of flexibility which are typical of the small size are reinforced by a low number of workers that, while in many cases work alongside temporary staff, dedicate their careers to the business. It is therefore possible to hypothesize that investments made in staff training will have
direct benefits for the business, and strategic plans and activities will see greater success than can be expected in the Italian sector.

Fig. 1: Distribution of permanent and seasonal staff in hotel businesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full-time Staff</th>
<th>Seasonal Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 20 workers</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 20 workers</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 10 workers</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 worker</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: our elaboration

The more articulated profile of the Swiss hotels is confirmed by an analysis of their organizational structures. In Italy, the predominant organizational structure is informal, with a simplified hierarchy and definition of tasks (about 60% of hotels meet this description). In Switzerland over 60% of hotels indicated that they have a hierarchy with precisely defined roles and tasks. This more precisely defined organizational structure of Swiss hotels led the qualitative research to look further at this area, studying in particular intra-business interactions and whether the owner regularly delegates tasks to specific workers. Most hoteliers said that they delegate principally operative tasks involving staff trained to work in the reception area, the kitchen and dining room, and in the guest rooms. Even if less frequently, some hoteliers indicated that they may delegate some non-operative tasks such as hiring new personnel, marketing and Internet activities (monitoring access, updating the website and direct mailing, among other activities).

The greater internal organization found in Swiss hotels reflects a clearer definition of tasks and a lesser concentration of operative tasks in the hands of the owner. There are hotels with a more structured organization which is part of their larger strategic vision. Both of these considerations indicate a tendency among the Swiss hoteliers to move away from the entrepreneurial spontaneity that characterized earlier stages of development and that is still a defining feature of the majority of Alpine hotels.

The more formalized organizational structure in Swiss hotels often means that one person is charged with managing online activities. In both Alpine areas the owner of the hotel usually does this, but significant differences were found between the two countries in question. While on one hand the family-run nature of the hotel helps to explain the greater involvement of the owner in everyday activities, in Swiss hotels, on the other hand, there is the tendency to have more precisely defined roles and tasks. In Switzerland, more often than in Italy, the hotelkeepers tend to delegate the management of online activities to the reception area, to a specific member of the staff or to an outside consultant.

The more structured organization found in Swiss hotels is not homogeneous across all categories of hotel, but it characterise mainly the larger hotels. The multiple correspondence analysis indicates two main business profiles (see Figure 2). The first, on the left-hand side, shows the characteristics of
hotels located mainly in Valais. These are mostly single-unit hotels of small and medium size (up to 30 rooms) with a low number of full-time and temporary (where present) workers. Management remains within the family and there is little or no hierarchy or definition and division of tasks. This is true also for the management of online activities, which is done directly by the hotel owner.

A different profile was found for the businesses located in Grison and Bernese Oberland. The right-hand side of the map shows hotels that are larger and that have a more articulated organizational structure. They have over 30 rooms and employ over 10 full-time and temporary staff. The larger size is associated with an organizational model that is hierarchical, with precise definitions of tasks and where the structure is managed together with other structures or as part of a chain. In this context the management of online activities is delegated to the reception area, to a specific member of the staff or to an outside collaborator.

Fig.2: Dimensional and organisational profile of Swiss hotels

3.2 Policies for marketing, the use of ICT and participation in collective initiatives

This section describes the main results of an analysis of dimensions considered in order to study the business strategy of the hotels (Focus 1), meaning the adoption of policies for promotion and commercialization, the use of ICT for business activities and participation in collective initiatives at the destination level.

In general it was found that the Alpine hotels use the short distribution channel mainly for sales. It comes into direct contact with the guest or through the hotel website. The businesses generally

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5 The interpretation of the map does not discuss specific references to the central and eastern regions of Switzerland – despite the fact that they are represented on the map – because the low number of questionnaires received (with respect to other regions) does not guarantee that the results can also be extended to these cantons (see footnote, page 3).
consider the commissions charged by intermediaries to be excessive, and these charges thus represent
the greatest obstacle to the adoption of a longer distribution channel and to having access to the
websites of tour operators.

Given these common characteristics, the research found differences in the commercialization policies
adopted in the two countries. The practice of direct sales is more common in Italy, where all
businesses indicated that at least 50% of their sales were through direct contact with the customer.
This was true for only 40% of the Swiss hotels in the study. The Swiss hotels combine the direct sale
with Internet sales and online bookings (about 70% allow online payment while this is possible in only
about 25% of the Italian hotels) and through tour operators and travel agencies. The multiple
correspondence analysis found, nonetheless, that this is not common among all Swiss hotels, but
mostly among those of larger size. These data confirm the uniqueness of the Alpine tourist sector,
where the offering and demand come together generally in a non-mediated and autonomous way.

As for the use of ICT, the businesses tend to use them principally for email and for the hotel website.
They are used mostly for promotional activities where the hotels have interpersonal communication
with customers alongside institutional promotion through the Regional Tourist Boards (RTBs) and
hotel associations. Also in this case, considering the characteristics that are common to businesses in
Alpine regions, differences emerge between the two areas studied. In Switzerland the hoteliers use
ICT for routine activities (bookings and responding to customer enquiries) and for more structured
operative activities (online purchasing and communicating with suppliers), in addition to activities to
support the business strategy such as the definition of specific offerings that can render the hotel’s
offering more unique (Table 5). The Swiss businesses declared a higher use of ICT to communicate
with other local operators (40.8% Switzerland; 27% Italy). This difference is confirmed by the results
of the test with $\alpha$ equal to 0.05.

The greater orientation of the Swiss hotels towards the use of ICT is also found in the frequency with
which they connect to the Internet and the short time it takes them to respond to email enquiries. Most
of the hotels always have the Internet connected and respond to customers within a few minutes. In
Italy most hotels only connect to the Internet periodically and take a day to respond to email enquiries.

The consideration of these results in strategic terms underlines how the hotels in Switzerland tend to
be easier to contact and more amenable to relate with customers. However in both areas the businesses
were found not to be particularly interested in intensifying relationships with already acquired
customers. This behaviour could reflect the strategic choices that historically have characterized the
development of Alpine businesses. Despite the fact that most customers are return guests (data
declared by the hoteliers themselves and confirmed in previous empirical research) the businesses are
not inclined to pursue strategies to promote and retain customer loyalty.

| Tab.5: Activities in which the hotels use the Internet and email |
|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                        | Switzerland            | Italy                   |
|                        | High (%)               | Medium (%)              | Low (%)                 | Not at all (%)          |
|                        | High (%)               | Medium (%)              | Low (%)                 | Not at all (%)          |
| Book rooms             | 75.0                   | 22.4                   | 2.6                     | 0.0                     |
|                        | 38.0                   | 44.0                   | 17.0                    | 2.0                     |
| Respond to customer requests for information | 73.7                   | 18.4                   | 7.9                     | 0.0                     |
|                        | 61.0                   | 32.0                   | 7.0                     | 0.0                     |
| Publicise special offers (off-season, last minute, weekday holidays) | 46.1                   | 19.7                   | 23.7                    | 10.5                    |
|                        | 28.0                   | 29.0                   | 25.0                    | 17.0                    |
| Search for competitive offers for goods and services to be purchased | 13.2                   | 38.2                   | 28.9                    | 19.7                    |
|                        | 10.0                   | 21.0                   | 36.0                    | 33.0                    |
| Place online orders or purchases from suppliers | 9.2                    | 23.7                   | 35.5                    | 31.6                    |
|                        | 2.0                    | 7.0                    | 31.0                    | 59.0                    |

Source: our elaboration
From the analysis of the participation of the businesses in initiatives with other operators, it was found that about 85% of the Swiss hoteliers take part in activities promoted by the RTBs. This is similar to the results for the Italian hotels, except for the ways in which the hotels participate in the activities. In Switzerland numerous hotels adhere to these initiatives free of charge, while in Italy most such activities are only at a cost. An analogous situation exists regarding the adhesion of hotels to initiatives with other operators in the competitive environment. Neither in this case are there significant differences between Switzerland and Italy (most hotels participate), but again participation was found to be mostly free of charge in Switzerland but not so in Italy.

Diverse considerations come to light from the analysis of adhesion to consortia and to the offerings made by intermediaries. The greater number of consortia in Italy is reflected in the higher participation in their activities. Over 40% of the Italian hoteliers belong to a consortium (nearly all for a fee), while in Switzerland almost no hotels adhere to consortia. Diverse results emerge regarding the involvement of hoteliers in package offerings proposed by tour operators and travel agencies. In this case greater participation is found among the Swiss hotels (about 54%) than the Italian hotels (about 44%). The same situation is found regarding adhesion to websites that are subject to intermediation either by tour operators or travel agencies, or by companies specializing in online sales of trips and vacation packages. This confirms the greater propensity of the Swiss hotels to interact with intermediaries within the distribution channel.

3.3 The nature, intensity, purpose and breadth of inter-business relationships

The study of the forms of relationships that the hoteliers engage in with the territory and with other actors in the competitive environment found some common elements between the Italian and Swiss hotels, both in the economic and social spheres. In both regions, the hoteliers identify themselves with a limited geographic territory, meaning with a specific location rather than part of a valley or canton or a specific natural resource (park, lake, mountain). This vision is more notable among the Italian businesses, who identify the territory where they are located with specific natural resources (the Dolomites). In Switzerland, instead, while in a more limited way, the businesses identify the territory where they operate with a political-administrative area (municipality, valley, canton or region). This difference in vision does not impede either the Italian and Swiss businesses from having a sense of community with the other hoteliers and from recognizing the similar customs and outlooks that allow them to engage in relationships with each other and with other actors. Moreover, businesses in both regions describe a competitive dynamic that is loyal and fair, and where unfair competitive practices are associated with the aggressive policies of price competition undertaken by large hotels.

Even though there are many commonalities, the perception of a social-community network among the Alpine hotels takes on different forms in the Italian and Swiss regions studied. In Italy the hoteliers feel a sense of community with the other businesses because they belong to the same location and have a shared culture and customs. The social-community context appears to be particularly strong in that it provides an atmosphere that is favourable for activating and strengthening collaborative relationships with other actors in the competitive environment. In Switzerland a different scenario was found. The sense of community with other businesses is present only where the businesses “do something together” or are involved in some type of joint activity. This affects the purpose of relationships. In Italy, in fact, collaboration with some categories of actors is mostly to provide some service (ex. the hoteliers association) or to re-direct customers to other hotels. In Switzerland, instead, collaboration is done by co-planning specific activities of promotion or commercialization. This aspect is also found in the analysis of relationships with food and furniture suppliers. In Switzerland about 70% of the businesses promote and/or commercialize local products within the hotel. In Italy over 60% do not engage in any similar promotional activities and 90% do not have any local products available to sell. This shows a greater propensity towards collaboration among the Swiss hoteliers and local producers, in addition to a greater interest in innovating the hotel product and service by strengthening ties with the territory and by adopting strategies of differentiation (promoting typical
local products) and diversification into related activities (the differing levels of commercialization of local products).

The extension of the network of relationships is another aspect that differentiates the hotels in the two regions. In Italy these relationships are forged mainly within the local community, meaning the area where the businesses identify with the natural and cultural resources. In Switzerland, on the other hand, the network tends to be broader and to involve, to decreasing degrees, actors at a canton level, regional level and extra-regional level, creating a sort of administrative hierarchy of territories (or of distinct destinations).

As regards the intensity of collaboration, the actor with whom the hotels collaborate the most is the RTB. This characteristic is common to both Alpine areas studied, but in Switzerland over 60% of the businesses collaborate with the RTB while in Italy only 40% do so. This differentiates the businesses in terms of frequency, as was found in the results of the tests with a degree of significance with $\alpha$ equal to 0.01. The businesses collaborate with the RTBs mostly for activities of promotion and commercialization but also for some local projects. These initiatives currently involve a limited number of businesses, which are involved mostly in short-term projects (in Italy) and in efforts to organize events and shows (in Switzerland).

With respect to the other categories of actors considered (see section 2.2), the ski-lift companies and ski-schools in both regions are “privileged actors” in the sense that they are sought after for collaborative relationships, even if less intense than relationships with the RTBs.

As already illustrated from the joint analysis of the size and structural characteristics of the hotels, also in this case the Swiss hotels of all sizes are involved in collaborative relationships of the same intensity. An early result that emerged from the multiple correspondence analysis is that the hotels tend to collaborate with the same intensity with all categories of actors. Moving from left to right along the first axis (F1) of the map in Figure 3, a growing intensity can be seen in the collaborative relationships: from characters that express an absence of collaboration (the profile defined in the left-hand quadrant) to characters that represent very intense collaboration (the profile in the right-hand quadrant). The profile represented in the left-hand quadrant is associated with single-unit businesses of small and medium size (fewer than 30 rooms), which are family-run and have a relatively unarticulated organizational structure in which tasks and the hierarchy are loosely defined, if at all. The right-hand side of the map shows a profile of more intense relationships and is associated with larger hotels which have more articulated management procedures and hierarchical structures. The aggregation of points that describes the greatest intensity of relationships tends to be in the external areas with respect to the other points on the right-hand side of the map. This leads to the conclusion that the number of businesses that engage in relationships with a variety of other actors is not very large, but the tendency to intensify relationships is associated with a more mature profile of the business.
4. CONCLUSIONS

The research has identified some profiles of the SMTEs mapped and differentiated by geographic area and by size, with reference to their assets (elementary assets vs. structured assets), the strategic content (entrepreneurial spontaneity vs. development of a deliberate strategy), and the search for strategic options that required collective cooperation at the destination level (individualism vs. relationships among businesses).

The study of strategic development shows a difference between the behaviour of the hotels in the two Alpine regions studied. The indicators (marketing policies, the use of ICT, the adhesion to collective activities and initiatives) adopted to study the strategic content reveal diverse profiles of businesses. This can be explained as two different ways of responding to changes in the competitive environment. The first approximates the entrepreneurial spontaneity in which short-term, reactive strategies predominate, as described in Miles and Snow (1978). This behaviour is most common among hotels in Italy that is related to an elementary assets.

The second profile, unlike the spontaneity of the first, describes a path of strategic development in which the business has a more evolved use of ICT, adopts less traditional marketing approaches and appears to be more oriented towards pursuing strategic options that envisage a sharing of competencies and resources. This profile shows indications of a more deliberated strategy (Mintzberg,
Waters 1985), meaning a strategy that is prepared to deal with changes in the competitive context by responding with medium- and long-term policies which are more articulated and less spontaneous and reactive. This profile represents predominantly those hotels in Switzerland that is related to unstructured assets.

As for the study of the forms of relationships, the Italian hotels operate in a context (atmosphere) and have the tools (technologies) which favour the creation of local networks, even if with only some categories of actors. The analysis of relationships nonetheless shows a profile of businesses that tend towards a more individualistic behaviour and which seek out collaborative relationships only on occasion. This behaviour, when interpreted in light of the elementary asset and the strategic profile, explains the lower interest that these businesses have in a) building relationships with other actors in the distribution channel, and b) undertaking strategies to differentiate and/or diversify the product by promoting and/or commercializing local products.

In Switzerland a profile of business emerges that moves away from this individualistic behaviour and which tends to intensify and strengthen the “nodes” and “ties” of the network, even if only with specific actors. The research found that the network tends to reinforce itself in a homogeneous way: the hotels build relationships of the same intensity with different categories of actors. This behaviour is associated to a profile of business that is more structured and which has a more articulated and defined strategy.

The network of offline and online relationships that characterizes the Swiss hotels reveals a strategic-managerial development that is more oriented towards pursuing and adopting strategies that foresee a sharing of resources and competencies. In other words, the Swiss hoteliers apply a business logic that is more appropriate in responding to the challenges of the changing sector; they have the characteristics that lend themselves more easily to the definition of an offering that is articulated and complex at the destination level. While the joint definition of the product does not involve all the businesses, some signals do emerge from the offering side (a developed propensity towards collaboration) and from the demand side (the presence of large numbers of return guests) that can direct the businesses to look for competitive advantages in terms of the uniqueness of the offering. In light of the characteristics of Alpine hotels, the advantages to be gained could lead them to intensify the initiatives for joint planning and development of the offering. This would allow the businesses to avoid the temptation to engage in price competition. We suppose that these advantages if reached, could be detained mainly (as happen today) by large businesses.

It is also important to underline how the hotels contribute to the competitive dynamic. It is considered to be loyal and fair. This is a further indication, as has been found in studies of strategic management, of the possibility that the SMTEs can create and strengthen networks that allow them to define a tourist offering that is integrated at the destination level. In light of the research results, it is found that currently the Swiss businesses tend to combine the collaborative and competitive dynamics more easily, meaning that cooperation and conflict produce dynamic networks that allow them to access resources and to define an offering that otherwise would have been unachievable.

This behaviour, however, is not common to all Swiss hotels, but is found principally in those that have a more formalized and articulated organizational structure. This asset, nonetheless, is not exclusively a function of the size of the hotel. It is the opinion of this writer that also the SMTEs - which are the main form of business in both of the Alpine regions in the study - can assume a more defined asset, meaning they can distinguish which operative activities can be delegated to specific qualified staff and which represent or can represent “core” activities for the strategic-managerial development of the business. In this logic, the hotelier is the main decision-maker - and it could not be otherwise, in light of the size and management approach that characterizes these businesses - but this could lead to some problems of having too much authority and responsibility for operative activities centred in one person. In this way the SMTEs could take more advantage of the benefits of their small size. Greater internal organization, even if in a vertical sense, is unlikely to be accompanied by the rigidity that can be found in, for example an organization split into divisions. The reference to hierarchical levels and
specialization of organizational units is contextualized for hotels with fewer than 30 rooms and fewer than 10 of each full- and part-time staff. A better organizational asset and a higher degree of formalization can contribute from a strategic-managerial standpoint to orient the business towards more evolved strategic options (instead of focusing solely on existing products and markets) and can favour the definition of a more articulated tourist offering.

The thesis made it possible to look in-depth at aspects that have not been given a great deal of treatment in the literature until now, the reason being that these are categories of business (SMTEs) that have become the subject of studies only since the late 1980s, and also because they exist in an environment (the Alps) in which the study of the strategies and management of SMTEs intensified even later (in the mid-1990s) with the first contributions on destination management.

The research has the benefit of having created a structured database that made it possible to obtain detailed information on the areas studied. It is a good starting point for the scientific study of inter-business relationships, and for describing and interpreting the dynamics of how competition and collaboration occur and work together within networks, also taking into account other categories of SMTEs (ski-lift companies and ski schools, for example). The description and comparison of the profiles of the SMTEs in Alpine destinations could also be integrated by identifying and applying some indicators that can evaluate the advantages (for the business and the destination) of a strategy with highly articulated and defined points that foresees the broadening and strengthening of the relationship network with the several stakeholders that contribute to defining the tourist offering.

Moreover, the research presents a methodology that can be extended and applied to the analysis and comparison of the strategic development paths of SMTEs in other territorial environments in which the tourist sector is of particular importance for local economic development and in which the same characteristics of “fragmentation” which distinguish the Alpine businesses are present.

References


