

# Internationalization of small Finnish food companies through event marketing

Ulla Lehtinen<sup>1</sup>  
Julia Puente  
Petri Ahokangas

University of Oulu, Oulu Business School, Department of Management and International Business, Box 4600, 90014 University of Oulu

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: [ulla.lehtinen@oulu.fi](mailto:ulla.lehtinen@oulu.fi), phone +358 8 553 2926

## Abstract

This paper aims to provide a better understanding for small companies in the food sector to develop their internationalization effort through event marketing. The main research question of the study is: What is the role of event marketing in the internationalization of small food companies? The empirical study consists of quality interviews that highlight internationalization through event marketing of five small Finnish companies. Christmas markets in Germany are the specific type of events chosen for empirical study. The results indicate that event marketing has the advantage of being a sales tool that combines different promotion activities in a single place and in that sense results in cost effective. The identified goals of the companies for participating in events can be expressed as increasing sales, promoting the company and the products, and networking. For an event marketing project the support from funding institutions and regional public entities are needed.

Key words: export development, Christmas markets, SMEs,

## 1.Introduction

To advance in the export development process, SMEs need to rely on activities that promote their products abroad. This is where event marketing acts as an export sales promotion tool (Wilkinson and Brouthers, 2006). Food and food industry are the main topics for events. Food events are thousands around the world of different sizes, including trade fairs, festivals, expos, and shows. This paper aims to provide a better understanding for small companies in the food sector to develop their internationalization effort through event marketing. The main research question of the study is: *What is the role of event marketing in the internationalization of small food companies?* The theoretical background combines the export development process with the role of event marketing that creates the framework for the study. The empirical study consists of interviews that highlight internationalization through event marketing of five small companies covering the following themes: Barriers to internationalization, the role of Christmas markets as event marketing and support needed for event marketing.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: The first part reviews the existing literature concerning event marketing. A framework that combines events with the export development process is presented. Section 3 explains the research methodology. The case interviews are summarised in section 4 before section 5 sets out the main conclusions.

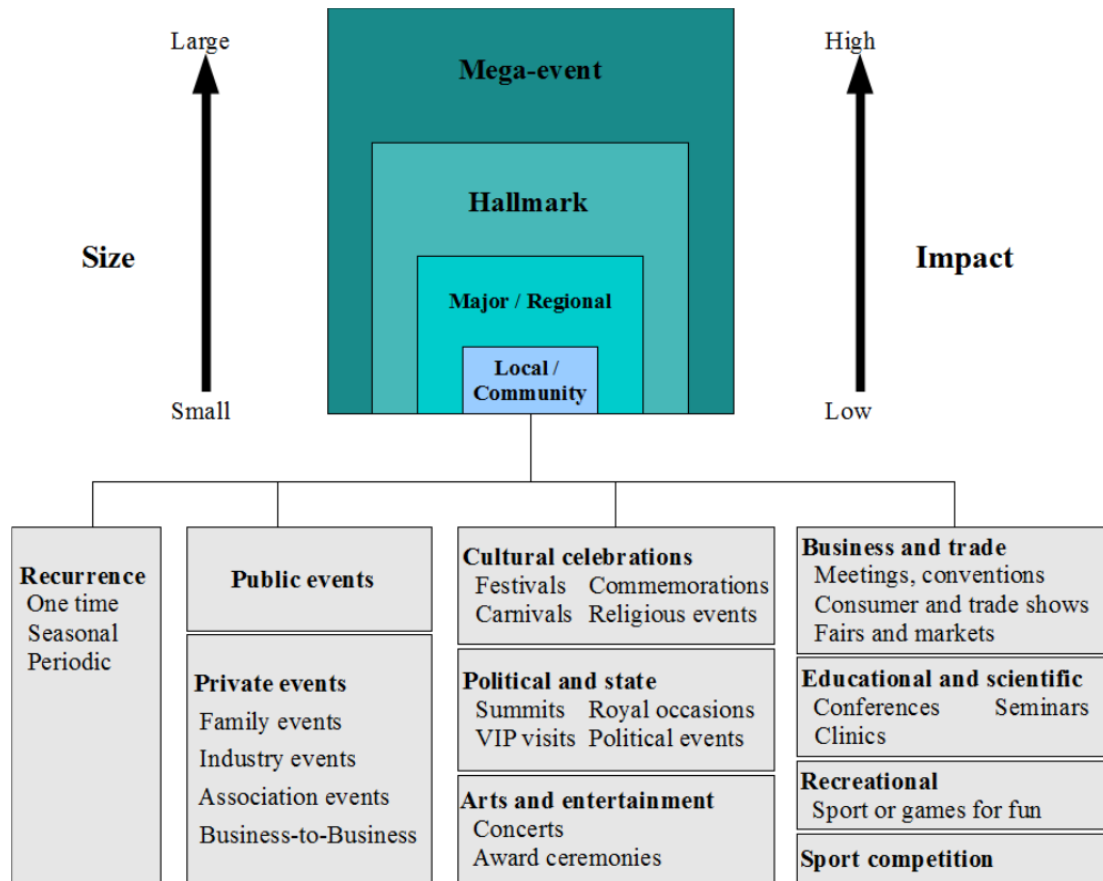
## **2. Theory: Event marketing and internationalization**

### **2.1 Definition of events**

According to Allen et al. (2005) events are celebrations of special occasions that are planned to accomplish determined objectives. Events are a part of a marketing strategy (Allen et al., 2005; Getz, 2008; Evers and Knight, 2008). Miller (1997) points out that event marketing as a part of sales promotion combines different activities in one place and during a period of time becoming a cost-effective selling tool. Event marketing is also a basis for establishing long-term relations (Welch and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1980) with organizers, other firms, and for gaining the preference of consumers. In general, event marketing is still little explored as an export promotion tool, most of the literature found is focus on trade shows while the other type of events are associated with tourism promotion. One aspect that is very important for the SMEs regarding event marketing, is support in aspects like training, marketing, accessing information and networks, and funding (Wilkinson and Brouthers, (2006)).

Various types of events have been identified according to different criteria. As shown in Figure 1, events are classified by their size and the form (Allen et al., 2005; Getz, 2008) and according to the target visitors (Levinson et al., 1997) and by their recurrence. The cities and countries around the world manage a portfolio of events (Getz, 2008) of different sizes and forms. In general, public events gather a considerable number of people while private ones tend to be specialized in a topic and to be intense to some extent especially when they are related to business (Allen et al., 2005). Themes for events cover all the aspects of human and business life such as culture, policies, entertainment and education. The events of interest in this research are those related to business and trade that can help with exporting. Also political and social events organized by entities with ties to Finland, like Embassies, trade organizations, and associations of Finns abroad. And finally cultural events associated with food where the Finnish food SMEs can present their products.

The role of events covers various aspects. Socially, events create sense of belonging, pride, and identity (Getz, 2008), preserve and revitalize traditions. In the business field, events represent business and networking opportunities (Allen et al., 2005; Levinson, 1997; Miller, 1997; Saget 2006) because the company has access to new, actual or potential customers, and distributors, press, other firms in the same industry with similar or complementary products.

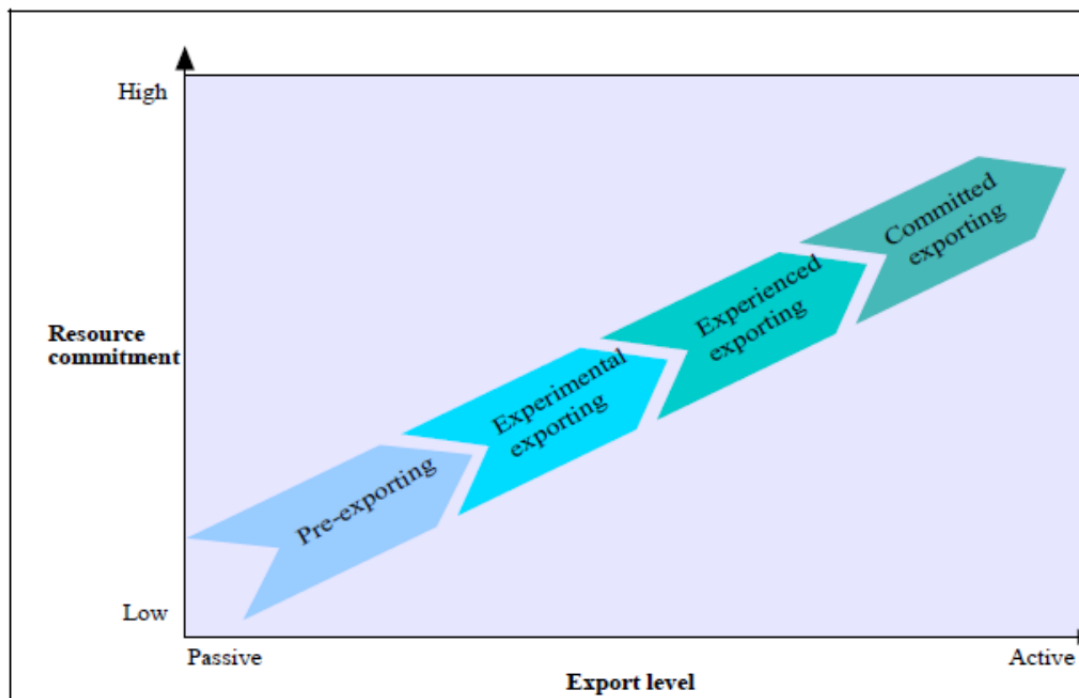


**Figure 1. The classification of events (Adopted from Allen et al.(2005) and Getz (2008))**

## 2.2. Event marketing and the internationalization process

Barriers to SME internationalization can be grouped in three main categories: financial, information, networking, and managerial capacity. At the same time, the barriers can be internal and external to the firm. (Cavusgil, 1984, Lenidou, 2004, European Commission, 2010). SMEs face problems derived from the lack of resources, difficulties of accessing funding and technology, and limited management capabilities. These problems become more critical regarding the internationalization process of SMEs and issues like productivity and market knowledge arise. SMEs can explore exporting gradually (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977), start with a low commitment of resources, and obtain support and accompaniment along the exporting phase from experts from both private and public organizations specialized in SMEs consultancy. Even when support for SMEs exists, smaller companies still find it more difficult to venture in exporting. This is evidenced by the fact that in Europe the percentage of SMEs exporting is 25% (European Commission, 2010c). In small countries, like Finland, many SMEs consider that internationalization is a must as they find that the local market limits their growth projects (ibid.). Nevertheless, exporting still demands an active behavior from the seller to follow the export development path. Exporting is referred to a development process for which different models can be applied (see Bilkey, 1978 ; Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1984a and 1984b; Reid, 1981; Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996; Ruzzier, Hisrich, and Antoncic, 2006; Welch and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1980; Wortzel and Wortzel, 1981) to succeed and make exports become common operations for the firm. If the firm is committed to develop exports, the involvement increases with time as the result of accumulated experience.

Exports needs to be supported by promotion and networking for opening and expanding into markets abroad. In Figure 2, the export model by Leonidou and Katsikeas (1996) grouping export development with four stages: pre-exporting, experimental exporting, experienced exporting, and committed exporting.



**Figure 2. Export development process (Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996)**

In pre-exporting stage, the role of management is critical to determine how active will be the company in preparing for exporting (Welch and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1980). This stage is time and resource consuming. Organizing promotional trips abroad and visits to trade shows are another source of initial exporting (Reid, 1981). Therefore, firm's resources regarding personnel, marketing, financial and production are also determinants for exporting. In the experimental export stage, new export or inexperienced exporters expose a positive attitude towards exporting (Bilkey and Tesar, 1977). After the first export, if the firm decides to continue with exporting can choose between coming a passive or an active exporter. According to Alvarez (2004) the active exporter puts more effort at the development of the international business. Management's commitment with export development manifests in acquiring experience, doing trips abroad for market intelligence, meeting potential customers, and promote the company and its products. As an exporter in the committed exporting stage, the firm looks for business opportunities not only introducing new products into existing markets, but also by exploring new markets (Reid, 1981; Cavusgil, 1984a). Management focus on export expansion, followed by increasing resources allocation and marketing activities which are regular participation in trade shows, increase advertisement in exporters directories, and marketing outside the country.

Event marketing is an export development tool (Wilkinson and Brouters, 2006; Evers and Knight, 2008) that support the process in a sense that a gradual involvement in internationalization can be achieved by participating in different types of events. What is expected is that development occurs in the type of distribution channels used, psychological distance to markets, the numbers or target markets, the orientation towards internationalization, and export intensity (Moen and Servais, 2002).

Figure 3. shows the relationship between event marketing and export development process in a matrix that combines the different export development stages with the types of events that can be used in each phase, according to their size, target visitors, and content.

Pre-exporting	Experimental exporting	Experienced exporting	Committed exporting
	Local / Community events	Regional Hallmark events	Regional Hallmark Mega-events
Business and trade events	Business & trade Political-social events	Business & trade Political-social Cultural events	Business & trade Political-social Cultural events
Private events	Private and public events	Private and public events	Private and public events
Trade shows	Trade shows	Trade shows Festivals	Trade shows Festivals Fairs

**Figure 3. Event marketing role in export development process (Adapted from Leonidou and Katsikeas, 1996; Allen et al. (2005) and Getz (2008).**

### 3. Research methodology

The research is an object of a qualitative analysis which helps to answer the research question (Glenn, 2010) by understanding how and why small food companies can use event marketing as a part of their internationalization process. In this study, validity was assured through triangulation that was used in form of interviews, literature research and case study. The purpose of this research is explanatory. According to Robson (2002 p. 59) explanatory study seeks an explanation of a situation or problem, traditionally but not necessary in the form of casual relationships. It explains patterns relating to the phenomena being researched. Since existing research on event marketing in internationalization process is limited, this study approaches the phenomenon using qualitative case study. This is in line with Yin (1989), Eisenhardt (1989) and Perry (1998) who advocate that exploratory case studies are appropriate where the existing knowledge base is poor and the available literatures provide no conceptual framework or hypotheses to note.

This study is a part of a project “Internationalization strategies for small food firms” financed by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation. The objective of the project carried out 2010-2012 to support small food firms to enter international markets by studying the alternative ways of internationalization.

The majority e.g. 91 % of Finnish food companies are micro and small-sized enterprises, the most of them are bakeries and vegetables, berries, fruit and meat processors (Food from Finland, 2011). The role of these small food companies in internationalization has been minimal so far; according to a survey from the year 2010, 15 % of small and medium sized companies have some export activities. Although the food industry is the fourth biggest in the country and employs 12 % of the labor force. (Hyrylä, 2011). Regarding the variety of products, “Food from Finland” considers that there is a wide portfolio including not only traditional and typical food, but also tasty, convenient, quality, innovative and functional products. The size of the domestic market and the fierce competition from both domestic and foreign firms combined with the desire for generating revenue, growth and development boost SMEs to cross national borders and reach new markets inside and outside of the European union (EU). The seasonal variation of raw materials availability and low production volume are two specific features that may hinder small Finnish food companies to enter international markets.

In the empirical part, Christmas markets in Germany are the specific type of events that were chosen to study by the project. Christmas markets are classified (see Figure 1) as local and regional events, and especially in Germany they have become hallmark events. Christmas markets are seasonal street markets before Christmas and are a form of retailing. There are more than 2500 Christmas markets in Germany, where the estimated revenue from these events is between €3 and €5 billion, with visitors spending an average of thirty euro (Spiegel Online, 2009). Nowadays Christmas markets are present around the world competing with shopping centre and other retailers during the holiday season.

The respondents of the empirical study represent five small food companies with some experience from using event marketing:

- Company A sells traditional Finnish food products
- Company B sells and produces fish products
- Company C sells and produces liquors and sprits
- Company D sells and produces berry wines, juices and jams
- Company E sells food products and handcrafts, organizes Finnish Christmas Villages in Germany.

All companies have experience in taking part of Christmas markets in Germany: Companies A, B and C has participated in “Arctic Village” in Halle. Companies D and E have taken part “Finnish Christmas Villages” in Hanover, Leipzig and Stuttgart as a part of local Christmas markets. Both of these marketing events were first organized by supporting project from Finland

The companies are relatively new exporters: Companies A and B started in 2005, company C in 2007, and Company D in 2011. According to the export development process (figure 2), they could be located between the experimental stage and the experienced exporting stage. On the other hand, company E, which organizes the Finnish Christmas Villages in Germany started to export ten years ago.

### **3.1. Data collection**

The primary data collected originates from the answers obtained from the semi-structured interviewees (see table 1). Secondary data was obtained from Internet visiting the web paged for food SMEs involved in event marketing, and of the tourist offices of Germany, Belgium

and Netherlands; documents published online, statistics accessible online, books, and journal articles.

**Table 1. Interview data**

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Contact data</i>
Respondent 1	Consultant of companies A and B	Personal interview, 16.5.11; 40 min
Respondent 2	CEO of the company C	Personal interview, 27.4.11; 40 min
Respondent 3	Owner of the company D	Interview via e-mail, 17.05.11
Respondent 4	Co-owner of the company E	Interview via e-mail; 5.4.11
Respondent 5	Specialist, Business Development	Personal interview, 26.5.11; 40 min

The interviews covered issues related to internationalization, exporting and participation in events abroad and experience in Christmas markets. The information collected was analyzed using the theoretical background and interpreted to present the findings and conclusions. In the following section, we concentrate on two themes of the interviews: 1) Barriers to internationalization 2) Role of Christmas markets as event marketing for the companies 3) Support needed for event marketing.

## 4. The analysis of interviews

### 4.1. Barriers to internationalization

Based on the interviews, the opening of new markets is difficult for small companies. There is an idea of specializing in niche markets among studied companies. Competition is very high in terms of price and delivery times. In addition, food products are easier to supply from neighborhood countries to Germany than from Finland. Small companies lack resources and contacts for entering international markets. The interviewees pointed out that there are better opportunities if companies present themselves as a group or through a third bigger and stronger company with experience in marketing and sales.

Another aspect of the main concern that companies indicated is the difficulty of finding marketing and distribution partners and who have a true interest commitment to represent the company's interest.

*“The hardest thing is maybe to find the right partners, the right cooperators. How to be sure that you finally get some wholesaler importer that he really works for your products, he might have hundred other products and our products is down there in the mass of products that he never steps (in); like nobody ever sees it.”(Respondent 1).*

*In Germany, we didn't have very good luck with this partner, so we had to change partner companies. And maybe there's also this, that maybe we were not read, the products were not, OK, very good lucrative products, cloudberry liquors and so, but there's still the problem that it's not a volume product. It's hard to find a partner that sees big potential to earn money in your products. (Respondent 2)*

It was also highlighted that marketing activities are more demanding when targeting new markets with an unknown brand. The company should dedicate more efforts, which means more resources to invest in promotional activities.

*“And another thing is when we are producing consumer goods, consumer products, the brand is very, very important. The brand is everything, and our brand of course, is totally unknown when you go to other markets.”(Respondent 2)*

Another interesting finding is the importance to have the right market for the products and thus, at some level the companies have to make some minor customization to their products just to adjust to the local customers’ preferences when entering foreign markets.

Companies started exporting to other countries within the EU considering the benefits of trading within the zone. Outside EU, there is necessary to learn the business practices of each country which can be more complex. Companies A, B, and C have had a joint export program in which they are currently working. The aim is to plan their entry to new markets to increase exports. Cooperation between companies is considered very important, because it brings contacts and business opportunities. Companies also considered their representatives abroad to be a very important part of their network. Most of the networking directly done by the companies is domestic. Locally, the distribution channels are wholesalers and retailers. Internationally, they use agents, and distributors to reach the markets.

*“When we are planning our sales to other countries we have to also think very carefully how to solve the question who is going to sell our products for example in Germany or in Russia ? Do we have some representative over there and which companies those could be? Etc. So those are very important questions and those companies should be found before we can start really follow markets there, but little by little.” (Respondent 1)*

At the same time that the companies have experimented with exporting they are developing their business in Finland. Companies are first focusing on a few markets without abandoning to explore new opportunities abroad, a deep understanding and the development of current markets seems necessary before expanding exporting.

*“We have been many trade exhibitions in Spain and Germany. However this year we are not going to any because now we are just trying to get some benefits from those visits last year and earlier (Respondent 2)”*

#### **4.2. Role of Christmas markets as event marketing for the companies**

The companies were participating in Christmas markets though two different projects. Companies A, B, C, and D are indirectly exporting when participating in Christmas markets by selling their products through the exhibitors who go there. In one way, they are minimizing risk and costs while benefiting cooperation; their products are reaching the thousand visitors that attend those events.

*“No we are not wanting to do it by ourselves. How we are present in Christmas markets is through those companies that are selling, are buying our products, and selling our products among other products that they are selling over there. And we have both Finnish companies and German companies as our Christmas market customers”(Respondent 2)*

The costs and expenses of participating in Christmas markets are high for SMEs, originated in the storage costs, transportation, and personnel, among others. Also the risk associated for example, if there are not enough visitors and they cannot obtain the expected sales.

*“Let’s say, the pressure which is every time it is a very thick schedule to do things very shortly and very fast way: to build this village and to unload this village those are really hard work. And also the risk when you are taking and economic risk for making those markets it is not easy we are talking about big money so in very short time we need to collect thousands of*



*Euros so if it is not good weather you can lose everything, so it is hard work but it is normal work when trying to do things by yourself.” (Respondent 1)*

The event marketing represents growth opportunities for small Finnish food companies.

*“Finland is a small market and we joined EU in the year 2005 so I thought that the small Finnish companies have to find out what kind of products would sell there. Why German Christmas Markets? Because I have been living in Germany many years I know how a large business the German Christmas Markets are. One more reason: the German Christmas Market is a long period, it takes 3-4 weeks, so there is time enough to find out what you need to find out: what products really sell, is the price ok, what is the feedback of customers and so on...(Respondent 4)*

The interviewees also highlighted that Christmas markets are a good place for promotional activities and networking. As the Companies are already exporting to Germany, their products can be bought outside Christmas markets, and therefore, these events support the sales promotion of the products.

*“The markets are not our goal, the markets are a way to build up our product sets and our business and to make us famous.” (Respondent 4)*

*“They (Christmas markets) worked at the beginning as a place where we make Finland famous and tested our products for our own product sets. That is still one part of their role also today. But mainly they are PR-happenings, where you can taste, smell and see a Finnish flair with your own senses.”(Respondent 4)*

From the business point of view, in Christmas markets the seller generates immediate sales, shows its products, generates income, and gains costumers. According to the products offered, for Finnish food companies Christmas markets could represent a substantial increase in sales derived from the volume of products that can be sold during the time in which the markets are organized. Christmas markets are seen as events for increasing sales and revenues, and promotion activities. Also, Christmas markets were seen to create networking opportunities.

*....However the networks and the logistics questions and all those things that they can find our products in Germany easily, those we have to create but now are doing that work but not very fast but still doing something and I think after one year we are in better positions and maybe some have some real contact and some real way to send our products to Germany and other countries and then the real export work will start, in about one year I think.”(Respondent 1)*

### **4.3. Support needed for event marketing**

The companies have used the services of organizations supporting the internationalization of Finnish companies. Two of those organizations are Business Oulu and the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY-center).

For the case of the Oulu region food SMEs, the organizations undertaking support activities have had an important role in situations like obtaining funding and for having access to potential new partners.

*“Yes, it is easier if the act together so they can share the costs that are not financed. Besides they can take advantage of the sales skills of other in the group” (Respondent 5)*

The organization has participated in the past in organizing events and funding event marketing projects abroad. Examples of the projects are the Christmas market in Stuttgart; the participation of the Arctic Village in the Christmas market in Halle; the Christmas market in Brussels. The activities related to event marketing have been a mixed initiative between the companies and Business Oulu.

There are costs associated that should be taken into account when planning event marketing. Finnish SMEs has access to funding for these type of projects provided by Ely-centers and from banks. Any company can access the services provided by the organization. Ely-centers offer 50% funding of the project and can be accessed through Business Oulu and for applying, the company has to make a business plan for which they also receive assistance from Business Oulu. However the limitation in economic resources can jeopardize the effort:

*“in many cases they (SMEs) don't have the other 50%.” (Respondent 5)*

Even when different programs are promoted by the EU for SMEs, still the companies find it difficult to get the kind of support they consider effective for their needs.

*“I had a plan for making a market situation better from hereby together with the City of Oulu but I am very disappointed the way they treat those things. They don't understand, they are talking but they can not do things, I don't know why, I have tried three times to make cooperation so that we could make some promo material for showing the people in middle Europe, we have a plan to make a documentary movie and work here in Oulu market area to bring some of that, but it is difficult for people in Oulu, those people who are deciding what to do and when, etc.” (Respondent 1)*

#### **4.4. Conclusions**

Concerning the barriers of internationalization, the results from the interviews support existing literature. Small food companies lack resources and contacts for entering international markets. Also, the difficulty of finding trustworthy marketing and distribution partners is a limitation. The companies studied highlighted the importance of cooperation between other small food companies: Cooperation brings business opportunities. Also the companies can present themselves as group or through a third bigger company when entering foreign markets. It is important to notice that all of the companies attended to Christmas markets as well as international fairs through a third party or as a group.

Studied companies want to expand into international markets and they need to generate demand by implementing marketing activities to reach the consumers, and event marketing is one of those alternatives. For the companies, marketing during Christmas admits of increasing sells during the time in which the event is held. As the result of the market research done during participation in events, a market profile can be built knowing the quantities of products that are consumed during Christmas markets. The events are also good places for testing products and collect information about tasting preferences, which can be used in the future for product development. Christmas markets are also sales promotion activities. An individual Christmas market illustrates small part of the whole country, but still participants can observe consumers' behaviour closely. In general, participating in events is considered important and

companies are open to explore the new alternatives type of events and places where they are organized.

Because of the costs involved in event marketing and the limitations in the availability of resources that SMEs have, the companies have found that it is easier to join efforts sharing the costs, reducing uncertainty, and improving results. For some companies products have sold well in the events, and for others the results have not been as expected in terms of the profit. Some companies recognized networking opportunities derived from events, for this reason and to promote exports, they also participate in trade shows.

For an event marketing project the support from funding institutions and also regional public entities are needed. At the moment, there are no specific programs for event marketing. Even different support alternatives exist, not all the companies are aware of them and in some cases they just cannot use them - as in the case of the funding support for event marketing. If the companies have not resources to invest 50 % of the costs involved in participating in events, they find it difficult to implement event marketing.

## **5 Discussions**

The results indicate that event marketing has the advantage of being a sales tool that combines different promotion activities in a single place and in that sense results in cost effective. The main research question was: What is the role of event marketing in the internationalization of small food companies? The goals of the companies for participating in events identified during the research can be expressed as increasing sales, promoting the company and the products, and networking. Event marketing constitutes an alternative way of supporting the internationalization of food SMEs which combines with an export development process and the company and its products abroad. Because of the costs involved in event marketing and the limitations in the availability resources, the companies have found it easier to joint efforts sharing the costs, reducing uncertainty, and improving results. Some companies recognized networking opportunities derived from events, for this reason and to promote exports, they also participate in trade shows. However, because of the availability of resources that SMEs have they require support of external parties to venture in international event marketing. The supports identified are funding, consultancy from exports about internationalization, marketing support from promotional activities, and network support from other companies. For an event marketing project subsidiaries from funding institutions and regional public entities are needed.

Event research is a relatively new field (Miller, 1997) and therefore still needs to be explored, especially events targeting direct consumers and how companies can use these events to promote their exports and increase sales, gain market penetration and networking. Event marketing plays a role in the in the different stages of the export development of SMEs as the internationalization strategy chosen. Events serve to other purposes besides selling, especially networking (Evers and Knight, 2008) with companies across the whole value chain of the industry in an international arena. Several of the themes emerging from this study may be explored in more depth in the future research, for example, the role of event marketing in different stages of internationalization.

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