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## Polish exporters' use and perception of various sources of market information<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The transformation of Poland's economy which took place after 1989 contributed greatly to the growth of internationalization of Polish enterprises. Expansion of enterprises onto foreign markets is impossible without possessing adequate resources of information about those markets. The article presents the results of studies concerning Polish exporters' use of various sources of information and significance ascribed to them. The studies comprised 493 exporters, taking into account not only the size of enterprises but also the number of their modes of entry and market range of export activities. The analysis suggests that different information sources offer different advantages with none emerging as superior in all situations. The results indicate a differentiated significance and use of the sources of information about foreign markets. A general conformity regularity is observed in gathering information through personal contacts and exchange of experiences, as well as through participation in trade events. The Internet is also widely used. Generally it can be stated that in many aspects the results of studies of the Polish exporters are convergent with those of similar studies conducted in other countries.

**Keywords:** export, sources of information, international marketing research, Poland.

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## Introduction

The growth in the internationalization of Polish enterprises increased at a high rate after 1990 as a result of the transformation of Poland's economy. Nowadays Polish firms cooperate with overseas countries, regardless of their size and branch, but at the end of the 1980's this phenomenon was solely a characteristic of large, state-owned enterprises.

A pre-condition for effective export activity is a profound knowledge of a given foreign market/markets and the needs of consumers (people and institutions) who create it [Fonfara 2011]. This knowledge is frequently of intuitive character and decisions are made on the basis of presentiments. However in international markets which are characterized by fierce competition and volatility and where implementation normally entails high expenditure and a high risk of failure, accurate and credible data is necessary to make a decision [Theodosiou and Katsikea 2013].

One should remember that no market is limited to only one country. The processes of globalization, activities undertaken within the frameworks of WTO and integration processes at a regional level are responsible for the fact that the potential market for each enterprise is getting bigger and bigger. Therefore, in order to effectively develop international trade it is necessary to have market information to be used when foreign markets are chosen, when strategies are formulated, tactics on how to proceed are devised and the best partners to cooperate with on those markets are selected [Craig & Douglas 2001]. On the other hand, international research programmes are, as a rule, more complex and require higher expenditure than similar studies conducted within the country. This is the reason why obtaining information on overseas markets is frequently limited to the accessible secondary information.

The main aim of studies discussed in this article was to gain knowledge as to what kind of varied sources of market information the Polish exporters use and how important these sources are for them. The results obtained may prove very useful for the activities of national institutions supporting international market research, including small and medium size enterprises. They may also be valuable for better preparation of instructional and teaching materials for training in this field.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section is devoted to the review of the literature on the importance of gathering information about foreign markets in international enterprises' activities. The second deals with the methodology which was used in empirical research conducted among

Polish exporters. The third section includes results of the study concerning the Polish exporters' perceptions on the usefulness of market information sources. Finally there is a conclusion.

## **1. Literature review**

The significance and weight of the problem of searching for information about foreign partners and markets are emphasized in studies conducted by many authors, e.g. Hart and Diamantopoulos [1993], Ganeshasundaram and Henley [2006], Pulendran, Speed and Widing [2003], Hult, Ketchen and Slater [2005]. Gathering information is linked with an ability to select and use appropriate sources of information, taking into consideration their significance and usefulness [Theodosiou & Katsikea 2013].

Many of the published results of studies refer to enterprises from the USA and Canada, a considerable part focuses on the European exporters, whilst studies concerning the gathering of information for the needs of export marketing by enterprises located in other parts of the world were rarely conducted [Leonidou & Theodosiou 2004]. Studies carried out on the American market proved that the most frequently used institutional sources of export markets knowledge are, amongst others, the American Department of Trade, foreign distributors, export agents, national banks, investment consultants and international fairs [Czinkota & Ursie 1983; Howard & Herremans 1988]. Cavusgil [1984], in turn, emphasized the significance of branch publications (secondary sources) the use of which was indicated by American firms in the studies he conducted. Yeoh [2000] stated that the US enterprises which were starting export expansion used mainly personal contacts and institutional (government) sources whilst published sources were rarely used. Studies conducted in the period analyzed by Kleinschmidt and Ross [1984] on the Canadian market in the high-tech branch distinguished the following as the most popular sources of information about particular foreign markets: agents (distributors), customers, international fairs and branch magazines (coming from the given foreign markets). However, when making key marketing decisions the firms studied relied mainly on primary (or institutional) sources. The importance of institutional sources on the Canadian market was also underlined in the studies conducted by Reid [1984] who found out that federal departments of industry were very significant. Moreover of great importance were contacts with a given foreign market and knowledge

about it, which was also stressed in the studies carried out by Kaynak [1992]. Similarly, Seringhaus [1987] observed that for the Canadian firms the most important sources of information included personal visits and contacts with foreign markets and partners. Information coming from buyers, strategic analysis and product/price related activities occupied were less important. Norwegian exporters, in turn, most frequently used such sources of information as sales people's reports, customers, sales offices/trade representatives [Benito, Solberg & Welch 1993].

Numerous studies of the problems in question were conducted on the British market. At the beginning of the 1990's McAuley [1993] observed that the most frequently used and most useful sources of information about international markets and firms operating there were trade agents, personal contacts and international fairs. Bigger firms also used their foreign trade representatives and export experience. Extensive studies in this field were also conducted by Crick, who twice [2001, 2005] assessed the importance of some sources of information about foreign markets used by the British enterprises. Both studies underlined the significance of those enterprises' own research personnel, their own sales departments and the network of personal contacts, regarding them as the main sources of information for the British exporters. In the case of firms which used various modes of foreign market entry the situation was similar: their own personnel, the network of personal contacts and their own sales branches overseas [Crick 2001, 2005]. Also William's and Chaston's studies [2004] conducted on the British market showed that British managers, experienced as regards cooperation with overseas countries, were more active in gathering information about foreign countries where personal contacts played a considerable role. Moreover they appreciate and use the information obtained and gathered within the internal information systems of their own enterprises to a much greater extent and they also have a better knowledge of market research methods. Studies of British enterprises conducted by Bennett [2007] emphasized the importance of secondary sources used most frequently by the entities analyzed. This research showed that British firms use information from journals and academic manuals rather rarely, regarding it as abstract and unrelated to their needs. More often they use marketing magazines and most widely they reach for the so-called "grey literature", including amongst others business newsletters, information sheets, industrial reports, consulting firms' reports, bulletins and other materials devised by practitioners.

The above mentioned studies emphasize the great significance of personal contacts. This results from the fact that only part of the knowledge about for-

eign markets can be obtained from commonly available sources – some kind of knowledge may only be acquired by way of direct experience or from other participants on the market [Andersen 2006]. However in some countries even the commonly available sources of information are inaccessible and personal contacts may be the main source of foreign market knowledge [Lord & Ranft 2000; Enderwick 2011]. It should be mentioned that the Internet supports the development of interpersonal communication by being accessible and making contact easier [Descotes & Walliser 2011]. Many entrepreneurs admit that through the Internet they maintain contacts with their foreign contractors without incurring the high costs of personal visits [Yeoh 2000].

One of frequently mentioned opportunities of personal contacts are international fairs. The participants, both exhibitors and visitors, want to obtain knowledge which is often the main reason for their participation in such events [Evers & Knight 2008]. Fairs offer the opportunity to meet competitors and customers at the same time. Customers as a source of information provide the information based on their own experience which is extremely useful for exporters.

Specific features of the market and the culture of a given country also influence the character, importance and extent to which particular sources of information are used. For instance, results of studies conducted on the Turkish market show that its main sources of information include the observation of particular markets, marketing research and visits of foreign trade representatives in Turkey (personal contacts) [Bodur & Cavusgil 1985; Kaynak & Erol 1989]. A characteristic feature of Turkish culture is pro-partnership attitude, i.e. orientation towards personal contacts and getting acquainted with the other party in business. This requires frequent meetings and face to face talks. Similar conclusions were drawn by the authors of studies conducted in Cyprus where the island's exporting firms declared that the most important sources of information for them were, amongst others, personal contacts, customers, visits to foreign markets, and international fairs and exhibitions [Leonidou & Katsikeas 1997; Theodosiou & Katsikea 2013].

Analysis of the related literature makes it also possible to distinguish determinants influencing the character, number and extent of using particular sources of information about foreign markets and partners. The following factors are indicated here:

- The size of an enterprise – larger firms more frequently use the primary sources, conducting their own studies and looking for information directly on a given market. Smaller firms, on the other hand, often start from looking for personal contacts, recommendations from other firms or use

secondary sources of information about foreign markets [Walters 1983; Benito, Solberg & Welch 1993; Souchon & Diamantopoulos 1999; Hart & Tzokas 1999; Richey & Myers 2001; Julien & Ramangalahy 2003].

- The export phase (advancement in international activity) – the more involved an enterprise is in exporting activity, the higher its tendency to use a bigger number of information sources [Cavusgil 1984; Walters 1983; Souchon & Diamantopoulos 1999]. Also experienced exporters much prefer a wider use of overseas information sources, e.g. foreign agents, personal contacts abroad, international fairs or foreign trips (trade missions) than national sources.
- Information providing institutions. The latter are more often used by enterprises starting to export [Crick 2001]. This is connected with the fact that less experienced firms look for more basic information. When analyzing the results of studies conducted by Yeoh [2000] one can also observe that enterprises which start export expansion rely to a greater extent on personal contacts and institutional sources and much less on publications. It should also be added that (as indicated by the studies) in small and medium size enterprises the management often confuses experience with organized marketing research and treats it as a substitute for studies, preferring at the same time information obtained in an informal way [Williams 2003]. It should also be underlined that opportunities of gathering information from overseas partners are bigger when enterprises are involved in different modes of entry into foreign markets and when they have branches abroad [Crick 2005].
- Cultural differences – a priority for representatives of pro-partnership cultures is personal contact and getting to know a foreign partner, frequent meetings and talks (mutual relations, trust), e.g. Turkey, Spain, Asian cultures. Representatives of those cultures (despite the initial high costs connected with establishing personal contacts with foreign customers, representatives or suppliers) cultivate such networks of contacts because they provide access to information which cannot be obtained from other sources [Yeoh 2000]. On the other hand firms coming from the cultures of a pro-transaction character, where speed of action and effects are the most important frequently use also institutional sources and secondary information [Leonidou 1997]. Malhorta and Murnighan [2002] say that the basis of good cooperation between enterprises is numerous meetings and permanent contact. Experience resulting from this and satisfaction resulting from such a contribution make it possible to “shape” trust in the partner and “strengthen” his credibility.

- The uncertainty of the environment – personal contacts are regarded as particularly useful in relations with the foreign environment which is perceived as highly complex, often incomprehensible and where various ways of reaction and language structures used in the course of contacts make it easier to understand and interpret the information obtained. These contacts are also preferred in an uncertain and volatile environment which involves some risk to the activity undertaken. It is believed that in this case personal sources offer richer, more detailed and balanced information [Vyas & Souchon 2003; Yeoh 2000].

Studies on the sources of the gathering of information about foreign markets were also undertaken in Poland. An increasing amount of research and publications on this subject have been observed since the start of Poland's economic transformation in the 1990's, which resulted in a more intensive expansion of Polish firms into foreign markets.

In the years 1994–2004 the Foreign Trade Research Institute in Warsaw conducted a regular monitoring of the Polish export sector. The results obtained show that in that period the most frequently used sources of information about overseas markets were foreign partners and one's "own sense of the market" (entrepreneurs' knowledge resulting from experience). An interesting situation was observed with regard to a source such as the Internet. In the period when the Internet was not as popular in Poland as it is now the two above mentioned sources – overseas partners and "sense of the market" - had a considerable advantage over others. The more popular and accessible the Internet became the more it was used and the significance of other sources slightly decreased. International fairs and branch literature were also pointed out as very useful. At the same time the use of national centres of market information or Trade Consultants' Bureaux at Polish embassies was low [Jagiello, Marczewski & Wysocka 2007].

After Poland's accession to the European Union numerous research projects were also conducted. Their aim was to present the current state of Polish entrepreneurs' knowledge about the European market and the possibilities of operating there.

Within the frameworks of one such projects, Jaciow [2006] conducted studies on the Polish enterprises considering the variety, scope and frequency of the use of information sources. The most popular turned out to be the enterprises' own documentation and their own self-prepared and self-conducted market research. The firms analyzed used the services of research agencies to a very limited degree and the information obtained from the press or generally accessible statistics was not very significant for them either.

The review of literature describing the results of studies on the search for information about overseas partners and markets shows that (particularly in the Polish market) this is an area which poses a continuous challenge for researchers. Entrepreneurs themselves are often unaware of this. They try to operate in overseas markets “groping in the dark”, instead of using professional assistance. Information is the basis of each economic activity. The research presented in further parts of the article is an attempt to find out how and from what kind of sources the Polish entrepreneurs obtain information on foreign partners and markets and how they evaluate these sources. This research is the first in Poland to cover such a wide range. The results may, amongst others, facilitate the undertaking of the activities whose aim will be to make the Polish exporters aware of how one can organize international market research well and what sources of information they could use to make this research effective.

## **2. Methodology**

After reviewing the literature relevant to this study a standardized questionnaire was formulated. This was subsequently tested with several academics deemed knowledgeable in the area of research. The questionnaire consisted of three coherent parts, the first one of which concerned the profile of an enterprise participating in the study (size of employment, character of activity, volume of turnover, form of ownership, mode of entry and market range of overseas operations). The second part consisted of questions about the way in which the enterprise obtained information on overseas markets (organization of research in the firm – whether they did it themselves or used the services of specialized units, organization of the market research department in the enterprise, IMIS; the scope of information obtained; sources from which information was gathered; evaluation of the usefulness of those sources). Questions from the third part of the questionnaire referred to the type and evaluation of the sources of information about foreign partners. The research was carried out in Poland in 2012 on 493 Polish exporters. The term “Polish exporter” refers to state-owned enterprises, companies wholly owned by the State Treasury and private enterprises with exclusively (or in a major part) Polish capital. In formulating the sampling frame within this investigation out of accessible data bases which could offer the list of Polish exporters, i.e. Central Statistical Office and Kompas company, the latter was used because

it has more current information at its disposal although it does not cover all the exporters either. Considering the fact that the distribution of enterprises in the base does not reflect the distribution of enterprises in accordance with the assumed criteria the authors decided on a suitable sampling. It means that the sample and sampling approach place some limits on generalizability [Tarka 2012].

Field studies were conducted by carefully selected and trained people whose task was to contact an appropriate person in a firm (owner, president, chief executive officer, head of Marketing Department, head of Export Department) and to interview him/her in order to obtain the information necessary for the research being conducted. After the interview the data collected was checked for the completeness, clarity and accuracy of the responses. To answer the research questions the distribution of studied variables in the group of exporters examined was analyzed. The nature of the research required only the use of methods of statistical description i.e. the numerical calculation of the basic characteristics of the distribution of the traits studied in comparable groups of the units surveyed or the proportion of the units in which there was interesting phenomenon.

### **3. Findings**

#### ***Internal sources***

Internal sources, as the term suggests, come from “the inside” of an organization and its particular units. Due to the character of this data the information obtained makes it possible to determine, amongst other factors, the number of customers and their share in the volume of sales, sales in particular markets, production capacities, manufacturing costs, and the like. These sources include trade correspondence, offers, invoices, contracts concluded by a given firm, etc. An advantage of internal sources is the ease of access with the information being gathered quickly and cheaply. Many firms neglect or ignore the internal sources of information. At the same time this information is rarely sufficient to make a given decision [Muchlbacher, Leichs & Dahringer 2006].

Out of the internal sources of information distinguished in Table 1 the greatest use and significance for the respondents in their search for foreign market information was attributed to their own knowledge and experience of the firm’s employees (rank 1/5). The significance of trade documentation in

the form of trade offers was also highly valued (rank 2/5) – as much as 93.1% of the respondents underlined the usage of this source in their activity. A slightly lower result was observed in the case of trade contracts, invoices and correspondence with partners from different markets (rank 3/5). Statistical reports, in turn, were assessed as a source of minor importance used by very few Polish exporters.

**Table 1. Polish exporters' perceptions on the usefulness of market information sources – internal sources**

Internal sources	rk	$\bar{x}$	M	$\sigma$
Own knowledge and experience of a firm's employees	1	2.75	2.8	0.6
Offers	2	2.37	2.46	0.8
Trade correspondence	3	2.08	2.23	0.96
Trade contracts and invoices	3	2.08	2.25	1.0
Statistical reports	4	1.08	0.98	0.98

$\bar{x}$ , M: 0 –no significance; 1 –small significance; 2 –average significance; 3 – great significance.

When discussing the use of internal sources of information (Table 1) it should be noted that the studied micro firms and small enterprises used them to a smaller extent than medium size and large enterprises. Differences were observed in the responses concerning both the use and significance of particular sources of foreign market information. Small firms more often indicated a limited use of certain sources (trade correspondence, contracts, invoices, statistical reports) and their evaluation of the sources they used was much lower.

When comparing the extent of usage of internal information sources with the number of the modes of entry used by firms in their international operations it should be stated that:

- internal sources are most frequently used by firms which use three or more modes of entry (firms whose involvement in international activities is the widest); being very important the internal sources are highly valued by those firms;
- the smallest use and significance of internal sources was observed in firms which use only one mode of entry (particularly big differences were visible in the use of trade correspondence, contracts and invoices).

Summing up the analysis of the extent of the usage of internal sources, it should be emphasized that the results of studies showed their dependence

upon the size of enterprises and the number of the modes of entry used in international operations. The extent of the usage and significance of particular internal sources of information increase with an increase in the size of an enterprise and in the number of its modes of entry onto foreign markets.

### ***External sources***

External sources of information include official statistics and documentation offered by administration offices and authorities of particular countries, national and international organizations, chambers of commerce, reports of market research agencies and economic intelligence, various kinds of publications in the form of books, general economic and specialist magazines, catalogues, directories, databases, the Internet, personal contacts, and the like.

Due to the big number and differentiation of the external sources of information they were divided into three parts in this study:

- publications – materials accessible in printed form, e.g. magazines, dailies, statistical publications, directories, firms' catalogues;
- institutional sources – institutions providing all kinds of information on overseas markets and partners serving sometimes as intermediaries in establishing contacts and assisting in cooperation, e.g. embassies, economic chambers, economic intelligence units;
- other external sources – sources providing information not included in the above- mentioned groups, such as the Internet, all forms of personal contacts, self-conducted primary studies, international fairs.

### ***Publications***

In relation to publications, professional journals and dailies are the most popular and regarded as the most useful because 83.7% of the studied firms confirmed that they used them in their search for overseas market information (rank 1/7). A similar result was obtained for the use of catalogues published by competitors operating in given foreign markets (rank 2/7) and for the examination of the examples of competitors' goods (rank 3/7). For the Polish exporters' official statistics (rank 4/7) or ready-made reports of the institutions for market research (rank 5/7) are of small significance in this group of sources. Documentation available from banks (rank 7/7) is regarded as the least useful; as many as 59.6% of the analyzed enterprises declared that they never used this source when gathering information about foreign markets

and the majority of those firms which used it did not think it was very significant (Table 2).

**Table 2. Polish exporters' perceptions of the usefulness of market information sources – publications**

External sources – publications	rk	$\bar{x}$	M	$\sigma$
Professional journal, dailies	1	1.74	1.8	0.98
Competitors' catalogues	2	1.66	1.71	0.99
Examples of competitors' products	3	1.56	1.59	1.07
Official statistics	4	1.11	1.01	0.97
Information from market research institutions – research reports	5	0.98	0.87	0.95
Directories	6	0.95	0.85	0.89
Documentation accessible from banks	7	0.59	0.44	0.9

$\bar{x}$ , M: 0 –no significance; 1 –small significance; 2 –average significance; 3 – great significance.

Taking the size of the studied companies as a point of reference the analysis of the extent of the use and significance of the publications discussed makes it possible to identify the following differences:

- with reference to official statistics, the biggest differences were found between the smallest and the largest firms; as many as 45% of micro firms did not use this source and only 13.2% of the largest firms did so;
- in the case of examples of competitors' products this source was of great importance for 28% of the largest firms, whereas only 13.4% of the smallest firms indicated this;
- reports from studies conducted by market research institutions – big differences in the use and usefulness of this source were observed between the larger firms (250 and more employees) and the remaining participants in the study; here it can be stated that the significance of this source increases along with the increase of a firm's size.

The use of publications (Table 2) is also correlated with the number of modes of entry into foreign markets (most frequently the largest firms conduct international activities using more than one mode of entry). The more modes of entry a company uses the bigger the usefulness and extent of use of the published sources. This proves a greater involvement of those forms in conceptual work connected with analyzing potential foreign markets. The

bigger information-related needs of enterprises using different modes of entry also result from an increased risk connected with such a strategy.

### ***Institutional sources***

A general analysis of responses concerning the use of institutional sources of foreign market information allows the formulation that they do not enjoy a great popularity with Polish exporters (Table 3). As regards all of the institutional sources differentiated the majority of the respondents indicated that did not use any of them frequently and expressed the opinion that they were not very significant in the process of gathering information about foreign markets.

**Table 3. Polish exporters' perceptions of the usefulness of market information sources – institutions**

<b>Institutional sources</b>	<b>rk</b>	$\bar{x}$	<b>M</b>	$\sigma$
Business intelligence units	1	0.74	0.59	0.92
National Economic Chambers	2	0.73	0.61	0.88
Polish Agency for Enterprise Development	3	0.64	0.52	0.87
EU Information Centres	4	0.55	0.43	0.83
Portal of Export Promotion at the Ministry of Economy	5	0.53	0.41	0.83
Polish Embassies	6	0.5	0.41	0.76
Institute for Market Research, Consumption and Business Activity	7	0.42	0.33	0.74
Polish Agency for Information and Foreign Investment	8	0.39	0.29	0.74

$\bar{x}$ , M: 0 – no significance; 1 – small significance; 2 – average significance; 3 – great significance.

The analysis of the use of institutional sources (Table 3) shows that they are more often used by medium size and large firms. The biggest difference concerned business intelligence units and the EU Information Centres. For example, of micro-firms only 30.2% use information obtained from business intelligence in their activities whereas in the case of large firms it is 63.5%. Similar differences occur as regards the remaining institutional sources. This is somewhat surprising because one might expect that the main users of in-

stitutional sources would be small enterprises whose financial resources are too limited to conduct their own studies in this field.

Similar dependencies were observed when the number of modes of entry was taken into account. Institutional sources were more frequently used and were more significant for enterprises using different foreign market entry modes.

### ***Other external sources***

This group of the remaining institutional sources which are most frequently used includes the following (Table 4):

- the Internet – 95.9% of the Polish enterprises use this source to gather foreign market information. The mean value of 2.68/3 also proves that this source is very important for Polish exporters (rank 1/11);
- exchange of experience with other firms operating in particular markets – 88.6% of the firms studied declared that this source is significant for information gathering (mean 2.29/3; rank 2/11);
- international fairs – only 8.5% of the firms studied declared that they did not use fairs as a source of information, whereas 48.1% pointed out this

**Table 4. The use of external sources of information – other external sources**

<b>Institutional sources</b>	<b>rk</b>	<b><math>\bar{x}</math></b>	<b>M</b>	<b><math>\sigma</math></b>
Internet	1	2.68	2.74	0.63
Exchange of experience	2	2.29	2.43	0.89
International fairs and exhibitions	3	2.17	2.34	0.98
Main foreign customers	4	2.07	2.26	1.03
Self-conducted marketing field studies	5	1.59	1.64	1.11
Foreign agents and intermediaries	6	1.42	1.41	1.11
National intermediaries	7	1.42	1.42	1.04
Experts' opinions/consulting	8	1.18	1.08	1.06
Offer of search and match services	9	1.04	0.87	1.06
Trade boards	10	0.98	0.82	1.01
Electronic B2B markets	11	0.79	0.64	0.95

$\bar{x}$ , M: 0 – no significance; 1 – small significance; 2 – average significance; 3 – great significance.

source as very significant (mean 2.17/3; rank 3/11); as regards the use of this source, in both cases differences between enterprises are not too big when their size and the number of modes of entry are taken into account (88–97%);

- main foreign customers – for 84% of the Polish exporters these entities are an important element in the process of gathering information about the situation in given overseas markets (mean 2.07/3; rank 4/11).

The least useful and least significant out of the group of other non-institutional sources were the following (Table 4):

- electronic B2B markets – 45.2% of the respondents use this source of information (mean 0.79/3; rank 11/11) but only 5.9% declared that it was significant;
- trade boards – 55.9% of the respondents admitted they used this source (mean 0.98/3; rank 10/11), however only 10.1% regarded it as very significant;
- offer of search and match services – 56.6% of the Polish exporters use this source (mean 1.04; rank 9/11). Of these only 12.6% pointed it out as very significant.

Disturbing results were obtained as regards the source defined as “self-conducted marketing field research”. Out of the enterprises studied every fifth one does not use this source when looking for information about target foreign markets. On the other hand of the firms which conduct primary studies by themselves only 25.4% evaluate these studies as very important; the remaining part declare that their significance is average or small.

Firms which do not conduct any primary studies on their own or those whose evaluation of this source is very low, most frequently include:

- small and micro-firms,
- enterprises which use a smaller number of the modes of entry in their international activities,
- enterprises operating on nearby markets.

Similar dependencies are indicated by the results of studies conducted by other researchers. For example Burridge and Bradshaw [2008] show that the majority of the small and medium size firms studied do not make any effort to conduct their own market research on overseas market. Also Hart, Webb and Jones [1994] proved a positive relationship between doing self-conducted field studies and the size of a firm.

Considerable differences also appear as regards the use of information obtained from the main foreign customers – only 9.3% of the largest firms and 36.2% of the smallest ones declared that they did not use this source.

Moreover 37.3% from the former group stated that this information was of great significance whereas only 13.4% from the latter group shared this opinion. Such big differences are certainly connected with the number of foreign partners the firms studied cooperate with. Larger entities usually have longer experience in international activities, a richer base of the main recipients, suppliers, or generally speaking, business partners who may be the source of information about the market in which they operate. A similar relation exists as regards the number of modes of entry and the number of foreign customers connected with it.

Similar differences occur in the case of overseas agents and intermediaries – only 11.1% of firms using three or more modes of entry declared that they used this source and 31.7% evaluated it as very significant. This source of information, however, is not used by as much as 30.5% of enterprises using only one mode of entry; out of this number only 13.8% regard this source as very significant. On the other hand the number of firms with one mode of entry which do not use foreign agents and intermediaries as a source of information at all, amounts to as many as 30.5%, and only 13.8% declare they are very significant.

As compared with other sources of information using personal contacts shows that the Polish exporters attach a great significance to them and that they dominate over publications and descriptions prepared by institutional sources. A comparable value is only attached to a firm's own trade documentation and its own knowledge and experience. As regards the latter (own knowledge and experience) the emphasis on its great significance does not necessarily mean that this source is of high value but it may show that firms do not conduct more complex foreign market research using scientifically elaborated data.

## **Conclusions**

Summing up the results of the study on foreign market information sources used by the Polish exporters one should underline the significance of employees' own knowledge and experience as well as those sources with which they have a direct contact (e.g. main foreign customers) or from which the firms gather data on their own (e.g. the Internet, specialist journals and dailies). The role of international fairs is also worth mentioning – at such events enterprises do not only get acquainted with and establish first contacts with over-

seas partners but they also gather information about a given market, branch and competitors operating in it. Great significance is attributed to personal contacts. Information gathered in this way is perceived as more accurate (adequate to the profile of a firm's activity) and much more reliable. Trust is an extremely significant factor influencing the effectiveness of cooperation with a foreign partner and it is generally a pre-condition for success in international activity. It should be remembered, however, that when using the information provided by personal contacts, the exporter relies to a great extent on the skills of interpretation and judgment of other people. Therefore one cannot exclude the risk that the information obtained from personal contacts is, by nature of things, subjective, i.e. formulated by its providers and that it may be given with an intention to achieve a certain goal. Therefore when using such information the international experience of an export manager may be helpful together with his/her knowledge acquired in the course of practical activities in the international environment.

An especially significant and at the same time disturbing fact revealed by the study conducted is the really small extent of the usage of institutions (institutional sources), frequently established in order to support national exporters by providing them with information about foreign markets, foreign firms, by mediation between Polish and foreign firms, conducting market analyses and the like. On the one hand, as was proved by the study, firms do not know about the possibilities of using various institutional sources; on the other hand, it was observed that those institutions do not make sufficient effort to inform exporters about the assistance they provide. Thus it is important to make such an effort and inform the exporters about what the institutions could offer.

What should finally be mentioned, however, is the fact that Polish exporters are understanding more and realize the need to adequately support their decision to start an activity in foreign markets with appropriate scientific research. As compared with the studies conducted on the eve of Poland's economic transformation the Polish exporters have made big progress in using market information sources to support their export decisions. The studies conducted in 1988 covered a narrower scope of market information sources however changes which occurred in this field are worth mentioning. For example statistical reports were used, on average, by 35% of enterprises (now 68%), professional journals – 73% (now 87%), competitors' catalogues – 40% (now 85.2%), official statistics – 33% (now 69%), exchange of experience – 40% (now 93.7%), international fairs - 79% (now 88.1%), experts' opinions – 29% (now 67%), national economic chambers – 35% (now 47%)

[Schroeder 1988]. As regards the Internet and other online sources such possibilities did not exist at that time. The changes mentioned above show that the wide opening of Poland's economy and the challenges posed by foreign competition raised the level of useage foreign market information sources by the Polish exporters.

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