

A process perspective on trust building in B2B: evidence from the agri-food sector

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Abstract

This paper investigates trust building for prospective buyers looking for new suppliers in international agri-food chains. It presents three cases of the B2B buying process with a focus on the trust generating elements during its early stages. The cases were taken from one set of interviews in four agri-food sectors (fresh fruit, grain, meat and olive oil). Three different prototypical different buying processes are presented according to their main focus of trust and the different trust generating elements on which they rely. The link is made with the functionality of B2B e-commerce web sites. The significance of the findings is discussed. Though tentative, the findings contain lessons for buyers, sellers and B2B e-commerce service providers.

Keywords: trust, risk, buying process, fruit processing, fresh meat, food specialities, electronic market

Introduction

Trust, as a precondition for the creation of B2B business relationships, is a much-debated issue. The recent rise of e-business, combined with still low costs of transportation, have increased its importance, since business partners can now be found anywhere in the world and can ship their products at affordable cost. Trust is a tricky notion. Any trader would agree on its vital importance, yet the literature does not agree on what it constitutes. Its dynamics vary across the cultures that are covered by business networks.

A trusting business relationship takes time to develop. The very first steps in a buying process are crucial. In searching for a new business partner, false negatives could be costly, i.e. a potentially suitable partner that is not found or that is discarded. This article analyzes this the empirically found groups that have a different focus on trust generation from one particular viewpoint: the sequence of the process of starting business with new suppliers. Do different clusters have different processes? Which trust elements are important in each cluster? Do particular trust generating factors apply in the different stages of the buying process? Before answering these questions, the concept of trust, the process of starting a relationship with new suppliers and the trust typology are briefly introduced.

Trust

Most definitions of trust agree on a basic element that is expressed well in the definition by Mayer *et al.* (1995): *'Trust is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to opportunism of another party based on the expectations that he will perform a particular action important to the trustor,*

irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. However, in practice, at the start of a business relationship this voluntary trust is complemented by a measure of enforced trust. Hofstede (2006) speaks of intrinsic versus enforceable trust. The willingness of a potential partner to be subjected to enforcement, e.g. by allowing a contract to be drawn, can itself function as a sign of trust. Alternatively, depending on culture and context, the fact of not asking for a contract can be a sign of trust. There is ample room for misunderstanding, and the timing of events is important. The organizational literature distinguishes three dimensions of the trust in a person: ability, benevolence and integrity (Nooteboom, 2002). Applying this framework to trust in an early B2B relationship gives rise to Table 1.

The buying process and the process of trust building

Much of the literature in the transaction environment is rooted in transaction costs economics (TCE). According to TCE information asymmetry, opportunism and asset specificity are the main issues to overcome in a transaction. The seller knows about the quality of the product, but the buyer still has to find out. The seller expresses his intentions but the buyer does not know whether the seller's future behaviour will be consistent with those. If the transaction partners have to make an investment that cannot be used in a different setting, they will want to make sure the other party sticks to the agreement. In their review on chain management analysis Hanf and Dautzenberg (2006) find that both cooperation issues (aligning incentives) and coordination issues (aligning actions) must be addressed in order to create smooth B2B transactions. It is reasonable to expect that the cooperation issues are prominent in the early phase of the relationship and that the future partners will use all the information about trustworthiness that they can get, as expressed in Figure 1, and that the relative weight of the contributing elements will depend on the situation.

Table 1. Trust in seller, dimensions and the related trust generating elements (e-Trust, 2007).

| Subject to be trusted | | Seller (supplier) | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|--|
| Dimensions of trust | | Ability (A) Benevolence (B) Integrity (I) | |
| | | Elements in the institutional environment | Elements within the relation |
| Control (Enforced trust) | Opportunity control | Contract (A,I) Legal enforcement (I) Certification (A,I) Monitoring (A,I) | Hierarchy (I) |
| | Incentive control | Reputation (A,B,I) | Dependence (I) Bonus schemes (I) Price premiums (I) |
| Trust (Intrinsic trust) | | Social norms of proper conduct (A,I) Sense of duty (B,I) Bonds of kinship (B,I) | Empathy (B) Identification (B) Transparency (I) Perceived cultural match (B, I) |

Transactions have various phases. A transaction economist may speak of the sequences search – bargain – monitor – control (Ménard and Shirley, 2005). A marketer might use the words find – negotiate – sales – after sales, for much the same sequence. In our study we are targeting the preparation that buyers make for the first cycle of buying: searching for a partner and negotiating a deal. However, it is not only about finding a supplier or product; they are thinking ahead. They need to find a seller whom they can expect to be acceptable with regard to the next stages in the process: monitor and control.

Naturally, one would expect the process to be related to two sides of a coin: the risk that is inherent in the transaction and in the business relationship, and the possible gain. One would expect to see buyers want to eliminate as much risk as they can as early as possible. And one would expect them to select deals and relationships that are potentially the most profitable. They might go for a risk-free product, or a risk-free market environment with good enforceability of contracts, or they could focus on the qualities of the selling company. By focusing on the early stages of a buying decision and a possible relation we might discover the balance between informal trust and trust that is formalized in a contract. How much trust is placed in the new partner in the early stages, and which guarantees are required? Can we find any clues on whether contracts are seen as complementary to trust or a substitute to it?

Creating a trust typology and assessing trust generating elements

In order to get a grasp on trust in the context of B2B e-business, a culture-aware typology was created (Hofstede *et al.*, 2009, 2008).

The typology takes the viewpoint of the buyer. The typology is rooted in the organizational literature on trust and the literature on buyer-supplier relationships and the typology was tested through expert interviews.

Figure 1 constitutes the typology derived based on Figure 1 and on other literature. The full typology can be found in e-Trust (2007). The lower levels are sector-specific; they include e.g. various certification schemes, contracts, willingness to engage in joint problem solving.

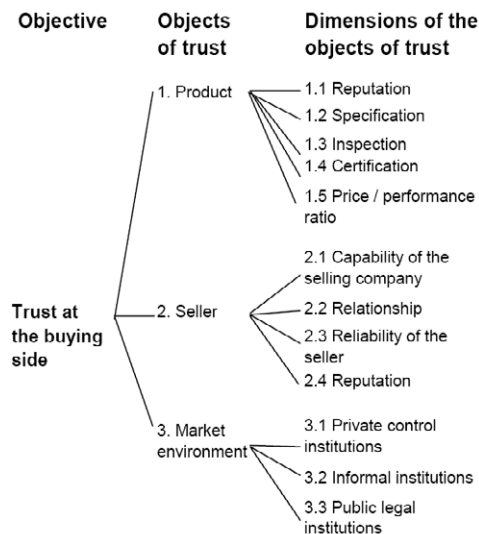


Figure 1. Top levels of the trust typology for new B2B sellers (after Hofstede *et al.*, 2008).

Assessing risk and trust

The flip side to trust is risk. A risk perception investigation was carried out on the same sectors as were used to derive the trust typology. Meixner *et al.* (forthcoming) empirically show, though only roughly, that the salience of trust elements turns out to be linked to salience of perceived risks. Table 2 shows which risks were found to be salient to buyers, and these risks are placed in relation to the elements from the trust typology that could be related. Accordingly, risks related to a buying transaction can refer to three objects: the seller, his product and the market environment. In the typology of trust elements, some of the elements are closer to control, others are closer to intrinsic trust. For the purpose of the risk assessment the number of elements of the original typology was reduced to the elements mentioned in Table 2. The assessment follows an AHP procedure (Ameseder *et al.*, 2009) in which respondents are asked to weight the importance of elements against each other using a tree-shaped structure of comparison. This assessment was executed in 152 companies in nine countries, four sectors and for various positions in the chain. Accompanying interviews were held with these companies. Remarks by the interviewees revealed that they did not miss any elements in the typology, that none of the elements is superfluous, and that very different elements are salient across the sample (Ameseder *et al.*, 2008).

Preliminary results of the assessments show that there is a strong focus on the product for generating trust in a buying decision, but some groups have a mixed focus on product and the seller-buyer relation or the product and the market environment. Table 2 shows that product, seller and market environment are related to different risks and trust generating elements. In the following we describe three cases of buying processes, explore the singularities and differences in the process and the different risks involved and the trust generating elements buyers rely on. Given the outcome of the cases it would be interesting to see how these buyers would be served by web sites that intermediate between them and suppliers. After all, e-commerce makes the searching phase easier to the degree that sites show the information that is used in that phase and they could offer means to serve the bargaining process e.g. when offering an virtual auction room.

Methods

The set of interviews accompanying the assessment of trust in the e-Trust project were scrutinized on clues for the buying process, either interviewees that described the different decision phases or any 'if, then' remarks referring to the buying process and trust generating elements. This resulted in three complete process cases. Additional information from other sets interviews was used to underlie the statements. In a qualitative approach we try to explain the empirically found most important trust generating objects and dimensions in each of these cases by the risks they face in the different stages of the process. We try to find out whether the processes make sense from a risk / benefit perspective. We relate the findings to the buying processes described in the literature and hypothesize on the possible underlying explaining variables. Implications for sellers to signal the right object and dimensions of trust in the search and bargaining phase formulated.

These implications are compared to the results of findings on existing websites. For the analysis of use the data on 30 different agri-food marketplaces trading different products, with different position in the chain, different revenue models, and different countries of origin that was gathered in Briz *et al.* (2007). First we give examples on how the searching and bargaining phases are facilitated on the web sites. From the 30 websites we were able to categorize 10 websites according to the buying processes in our cases. We compare the trust generating dimensions signalled on their websites with those found in the buying processes of our cases.

Table 2. Object of trust and the risks and related trust dimensions used in the assessment.

| Object | Risks | Trust dimensions used in the assessment |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Product | Information asymmetry on quality of the product | Reputation Specification Inspection Certification Price/Performance |
| Seller | | |
| Cooperation | Uncertainty about opportunistic behaviour. Related issues: a. investments b. fit of core capabilities and rents of cooperation c. allocation of profits, power | Capability (= ability or competence) Relationship (=benevolence) - between individuals - between companies Reputation Reliability (=integrity) - financial situation |
| Coordination | Uncertainties about: a. information (asymmetry) b. a lack of shared knowledge about decision rules | - adequate communication - deliveries (agreement) Problem solving capacity |
| Market environment | Uncertainties on information in new market information | Control institutions Informal institutions Legal Institutions |

n.b. for the purpose of the assessment the dimensions of the object of the seller were extended with 'problem solving capacity' compared to Figure 1.

Results

Case 1. Fruit processing company looking for inputs

This company large fruit processing company that produces branded products for the European market. Fruits or fruit products (like concentrated juices) are sourced globally. The results of the assessment for the buying process from a new supplier shows that the company has a very strong focus on the product as trust generating object and within this focus own inspection and specification are the most important trust generating dimensions. Seller qualities and the market environment do matter but their weight in the decision is low.

The buying process from a new supplier consists of the following steps:

1. Observed coming shortage of inputs or need for new ingredients for new products (with new specifications).
2. Searching: Looking for possible new suppliers, check their product specifications.
3. Bargaining:
 - Discuss if products with those specifications can be delivered, if ok, then:
 - Sample taking and testing, if ok then:

- Check on the firm. Sign code of conduct and auditing on environment, safety and food safety and finances. If ok, then:
 - Agree on price, deliveries: quantities, time; if ok, then:
4. Contract/buying.

This buying process could be described as ‘Input search’. Inputs should closely match specifications, because the final product is of well defined quality. The specifications of the wanted inputs narrow down the possibilities in the searching process. This particular producer values own inspection as trust dimension higher than external certifications, which could be explained by the high risk of reputation damage to the brand, when their final products do not meet the quality standards that consumers. This implies that for this producer the market environment may be almost irrelevant. Certifications are considered a minimum option. To reduce transactions costs due to high own inspection costs in the long run and to secure the right quality inputs, it is expected that processors of branded products would strive to have longer relationships with their input suppliers than producers of non-branded products.

So in this case trust in the buying decision is not so much based on intrinsic trust (narrow definition of trust) but rather on enforceable trust. The first transaction between supplier and buyer may be the starting point of a buyer – seller relationship, but intrinsic trust in the relation has to be earned after the first year of transaction, if the relation evolves. Implications for selling in this market would mean to signalling the right specifications in the first place and allow for site inspections executed by the buyer in the bargaining stage.

Case 2. Multiple retailer adopting a new fresh meat supplier

This case is concerned with a large multiple retailer in a search for a new supplier for its private label meat. In the fresh meat market national sourcing or sourcing from neighbouring countries is still important. This implies that most of the time either the supplier or the intermediate trader is somehow known to the buyer already. The results of the assessment shows that the trust generating focus is on the product as object, but beside this the seller has as much attention, especially the dimensions ‘capacity to solve problems’ and ‘reliability’. For the product the main trust generator dimension is certification. The environment of the buying process is not considered to play a role in the buying decision.

The process consists of the following steps:

1. New supplier needed.
2. Searching for possible new suppliers, see if producer has at least HACCP. Own inspection is less important. See if supplier can meet technical level required by the retailer, like EDI of VMI.
3. Bargaining:
 - Discuss if products as specified by the retailer can be delivered, if ok, then:
 - Sample taking and testing, if ok, then:
 - Further check on the selling firm. It should be reliable in delivering. There is a check on the financial condition of the firm. Also flexibility (problem solving capacity in our hierarchy) is very important: the way the selling company reacts if there are problems. If ok, then:
 - Agree on price, deliveries: quantities, time etc. If ok then:
4. Contract/buying.

We would call the buying process ‘Category supplier search’ as the starting point is a new supplier. The reliability of the seller is *very* important, because retailers want to avoid empty shelves for consumers. They need a supplier who is reliable *all the time, from day to day*. This explains the

shift in focus from the product to the seller compared to the first case. The financial situation of the supplier is used as an indicator for reliability. But in case problems arise, like product contamination, the ‘problem solving capacity’ of the seller is very much needed. The supermarket organisation wants their suppliers not to run away for problems and see their problems as problems their own. ‘This is not element that you can put down on paper, as the spokesmen of the organisation, ‘you have to have sense the seller’s priorities’. The retailing company demands high volumes, high standards for consumer packaging and flexibility and maybe technical demands like EDI and VMI, referring to the dimension of ‘capability’. The capability demands of the retailer will narrow down the number of possible suppliers in the market, and is a kind of precondition. Certification as main trust generator for the product can be explained that at this stage (multiple trading) there is no inspection possible on all products traded. There is a random check on the products delivered. Actually, this may also be the case for the wholesalers delivering to the multiple retailers. Like one of the international fruit traders states that supplies to multiple retailers: ‘We do not visit all the production locations. GlobalGAP is the minimum requirement demanded by retailers. The problem for us however is that GlobalGAP has still a different meaning in different countries. Within the EU plant protection policies have been harmonized, but for foreign countries this is different’. So the in case of trouble you have to rely on the willingness seller, e.g. a cooperation to find out were the problem comes from. Quality systems do not comply with this. So: ‘you have to get the right feeling about the company’.

Given the number of products concerned and the possible complexity and risks of the transactions and even though suppliers are faced with extensive lists of ‘specs’ in the contracts there seem to be more elements to be trusted (intrinsically) in the transaction between retailers and their suppliers. Trust reduces the transaction costs at the moment of the first transaction and is tested later on in the relation. Tested and found positive trust evolves and so does the relation. It also implies that information on the seller as object of trust is very important in the early stages, besides information on the product. Capability and certifications (like GlobalGAP) seem a kind of precondition and are important in the searching stage. The dimension of ‘reliability’ as for example indicated by clear financial reports are important trust generating dimensions to be communicated in the bargaining stage. This holds also for ‘problem solving capacity’ which may not be subject of the contract but should be signalled during the communications in more subtle ways.

Case 3. Wholesaler purchasing food specialties.

This wholesaler to catering services and restaurants is interviewed on the olive oil purchase. Olive oil is bought internationally and the assortment contains well known bigger brands, the private label of the wholesaler and olive oil from smaller producers. Well know brands are in the assortment because customers asks for them. The assortment beside these labelled olive oils may vary. The assessment shows that both product and producer are equally important trust generating objects, like in the second case. However for the seller the main trust generating dimension is ‘capability’ and for the product it is the ‘reputation of the product’, beside ‘price/ performance’.

The buying process consists of the following steps:

1. There is always a need for finding special products.
2. Searching new by browsing the market/ fairs, etc. for ‘stories’.
3. Bargaining
 - Sample taking and tasting, possibly testing, if ok then:
 - Check on the firm (demanded certification, competence, excellence, ‘feel good’), if ok then:
 - Describe the product, agree on price, deliveries: quantities, time; if ok then:
4. Buying.

This buying process could be called 'Browsing for specialties'. There seem to be a contradiction in the fact that 'Browsing for specialties' relies on trust generation of both seller and product. But this can be explained by the fact that the special product and the producer, the way the product is produced (or where) are inseparable: 'You start with a feeling on the product and the producers *at the same time*. So you hardly can distinguish between the reputation of the product and the producer'. For product the, after price/ performance, reputation is trust generating, but for the wholesalers strategy to generate new trends and keep up his exclusiveness the reputation of the product may not too widespread. Another importer of wine specialties being interviewed uses reputation in an early stage. In this case he will ask colleagues about the reputation of the producer to discharge of 'bad guys'. The wholesaler indicates that reputation may grow over time, especially when the producer is reliable his reputation will improve. The examples suggest there may be different contents and functions of reputation in different stages of the relation. Inspection may not be a term the buyers of specialties would use, but at the same time they will carefully check on the seller and preferably meet him personally. Exclusiveness also refers to quality and keeping quality at a high level, which explains capability as trust generating dimension for the seller. Again, like in the first cases, the environment is not an issue in the buying decision: 'It is your own decision, based on the supplier and the products and not the environment'. But buying is done in a somehow known world: 'It is important to speak the language, therefore it is difficult for me to trade with Russia'. Longer relations evolve when the producer can offer new products and innovations. Though it might appear that there is more intrinsic trust during the buying process, the case shows that there must be a common attitude to superior quality and the buyer and seller fine tune their philosophy of work. Implications for the seller are that he will have to signal a complete story of the product and way of production in the searching stage as well as the high standards of the quality of the produce. During the bargaining stage this quality focus is tested.

Electronic marketplaces and the buying process

The reviewed marketplaces offer different tools that can help their users in the purchasing process. Some websites only provide support in one of the four steps of the purchasing process, while others try to facilitate in all four steps searching, bargaining, monitoring and control. Here we focus on searching and bargaining.

If a buyer is searching for new suppliers he might be already be certain about the specifics of the product that the buyer wants to buy or he might not be certain about these specifics and would first want to have more information about products and specifics. Electronic marketplaces provide different possibilities for both type of buyers. Marketplaces such as fis.com and foodinonet.com have the main goal to provide their viewers with information on specific products. Fis.com has specialized on providing information on different products and developments in the fisheries, while foodinonet.com provides their viewers with information on all possible products and services related to food.

When a buyer is certain about the specifications of a certain product he or she can use the different marketplaces that directly advertise batches of products or advertises different suppliers. The website efoodcommerce.com for example provides search options on sixteen different product categories under which many different products and suppliers are located. The website b2bchina.com offers buyers outside China to connect with potential buyers in a market that might be otherwise difficult to approach.

In the bargaining stage the virtual environment makes it possible that market developments and prices can be instantly shared. The ex-trade.com platform enables direct market prices and market updates in transactions of egg-products. This information enables fair and objective bargaining.

Some websites directly enable price forming on their website by offering online auctions. A good example of such a website is pefa.com on which fresh fish is auctioned of thirteen auctions in Western-Europe.

Electronic market places and the trust dimensions

Table 3 summarizes the relevant trust dimensions found in the cases in the searching and bargaining stage. Central question is whether the marketplace make use of the trust dimensions that are important for their buying strategy.

An overview of the marketplaces investigated and the specific dimensions of trust on which signs of trust where observed is shown in Figure 2. If a website for instance clearly mentions that all their suppliers need to be certified for ISO 22000, one can conclude that they use the trust dimension ‘certification’ on their website, which relates to the object of trust of the ‘product’. More detailed information on the implementation can be found in Briz *et al.*, (2007).

For the buyer who is looking for inputs for their products, product specification is one of the key aspects to base a buying decision. The selected marketplaces that have a focus on connecting buyers and suppliers of inputs all clearly communicate the product specification. As the product is the main object of trust for input suppliers it might be useful to actively communicate all elements related to the product in order to build trust at for the buyer.

It is interesting to see that while for the buyers in the cases the market environment was not of importance of that it these dimensions of trust are supported by signs of trust on most of the websites. For the buyer that is looking for a new category supplier both the product as well as the some characteristics of the supplier are important. The buyer wants to be certain that a supplier has the right certifications, will be capable and will turn out to be a reliable partner, also when problems occur. Except for foodinonet.com the capability and reliability of the selling company are actively communicated on the websites. Except for bioforus.com no signs of trust are present that indicate to the object of the market environment. It is logical that a marketplace that intermediates in the biological market clearly communicates the market environment but due to the interest in certification that the platform 1sync (which is set up by retailers) does not communicate any trust sign indicating to that object of trust.

Table 3. Main dimensions of trust in the three cases according to stage in the buying process.

| Stage | Input search | Category supplier search | Browsing for specialties |
|------------|--|--|---|
| Searching | Specifications of product | Certification of product/ seller Capability of the producer | Reputation (story) |
| Bargaining | Inspection of product (sample testing) Capability of seller (site visit and audit) Price/performance | Inspection of product (sample testing) Reliability of seller (financial position) Problem solving capacity of seller Price/performance | Inspection of product (sample testing) Capability (site visit and check on quality focus) Price/performance |
| Decision | Contract | Contract | Agreement |

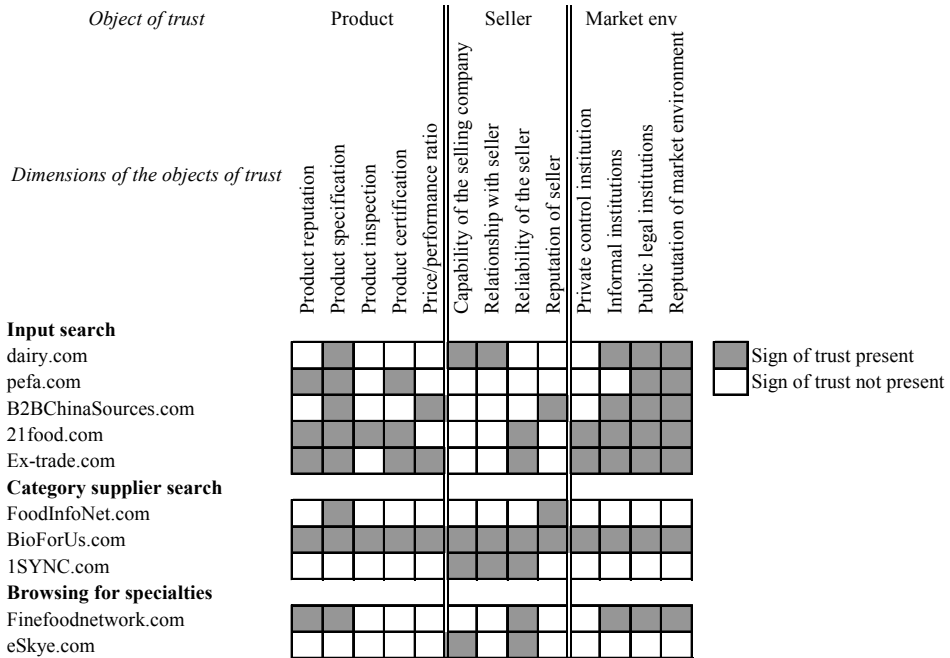


Figure 2. Overview of electronic marketplaces and their main focus (left), the objects of trust and their dimensions (right) and the score of the websites on these dimensions.

For the marketplaces that have focus on specialty products it is striking to see that both websites do not clearly communicate the reputation of the seller while the cases show that this is a dimension that is important for buyers in these markets. Both these websites communicate only few signs of trust to the customers.

Discussion

Though limited in number the cases show the variety of buying processes and the different trust generating dimensions that are at stake in the different stages of the buying process. Further research may clarify if these buying processes could be prototyped and how they relate with the many underlying explaining variables: sector, place in the chain, country, market segment, etc. All affect the kind of relationship that companies look for with their suppliers.

Cases confirm the general outcome of the assessment (Ameseder *et al.*, 2008) that buyers have a strong product orientation in the buying process. The cases however suggest that food processors stress the importance of products more than multiple retailers and wholesalers of consumer products. The latter two have a more combined focus on the product and the seller as trust generating dimensions. This shift in focus along the chain could be analyzed more specifically in the data collected on 152 companies for the assessment of trust in the e-Trust project. More specifically, it is suggested to test if producers of branded products would stress the product as trust dimension most and the importance of their own inspections, beside specification of the product. TCE postulates that increased inspection cost would imply longer relationships with their suppliers. Also the case-

analysis suggests that multiple retailers and wholesalers of consumer products would consider certification the most important trust-generating element of the product and 'reliability' of the seller. The market environment turned out to be not of interest as trust generating dimension in the cases. In two cases this is because the buyers stress their own inspection of the product and checks on the seller, whereas in third case the logic is that the buying takes place in a market environment that is known. Risks related to a new market environment are however clear the buyer: 'In new markets there is a risk of not knowing, then you need more information both on the product as well as the producer, and you need information on the information that you get, e.g. the meaning of a financial report. And you want to know about the political stability of the country in which the supplier operates.' Results of the assessment (Ameseder *et al.*, 2008) show that Slovenian countries stress the importance of the market environment as trust object. We suggest that the buying processes are not necessarily different than in other countries, but buyers have to put a lot of energy in finding the right information and check on the information. This situation is expected to be temporarily. Electronic market places provide new opportunities to B2B markets. You expect them to follow typical buying processes. The analysis of the marketplaces shows that not all market places have clear signs for trust in the buying process they mediate.

Conclusion and recommendations

This qualitative analysis of three cases in different agricultural sectors indicates that when companies are searching for new providers they make a connection between trust, risk perception, and the process by which they select new partners. In turn it seems that trust and risk perception are linked to market segment (commodity or specialty) and to position in the chain of the buying company. Sellers to have clear picture of whom they sell to and what to signal. Our cases indicate that sellers on a commodity market should clearly and closely specify their products and quantities, while sellers to retailers should signal certifications a capability right away if they sell commodity type products. Sellers of specialties should signal a complete story on the producer, production and product. Requirements for B2B e-commerce environments should also be linkable to market conditions and to company profiles, but the analysis shows that some market places lack important trust signs on their websites.

This article was based on a limited set of interview data. We suggest further research on the nature of different buying processes and the relevant trust dimensions and signs and how they can be communicated in e-commerce.

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