



UNIVERSITAT DE  
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# Do Chambers of Commerce have an added value in the web 2.0 era?

Commercial missions by the Chamber of Barcelona as an  
internationalisation tool for Catalan firms in a digital world.

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### **Abstract**

This study goes through the history of Chambers of Commerce, analysing some of the reasons for their appearance as well as their role throughout time. It then moves forward to analyse, in a detailed way, the history and development of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona (CCB), founded in 1886.

Emphasis on the international department of the CCB is made in order to evaluate whether the Internet and the web 2.0 era have jeopardised the internationalisation services offered to Catalan firms. Through 5 case studies of firms having participated in commercial missions of the Chamber of Barcelona, the strategic added values of this service are analysed. The study concludes that the differential traits and added values are: the status of public right entity, the built-in worldwide chamber network, the affordable price, and the direct channel with governmental entities to obtain subsidies for Catalan firms.

### **Resum**

Aquest estudi recorre la història de les Cambres de Comerç, tot analitzant la raó per la qual foren creades així com l'evolució del seu rol al llarg del temps. Seguidament, se centra en l'anàlisi de la història i desenvolupament de la Cambra de Comerç de Barcelona, fundada el 1886. A continuació, es fa èmfasi en el departament internacional per tal d'avaluar si Internet i la web 2.0 posen en risc els serveis comercialitzats per part d'aquest departament. A través de l'estudi de 5 casos d'empreses que han contractat missions comercials a la Cambra de Barcelona, s'analitzen els principals valors afegits d'aquest servei. Aquests essent: l'estatus d'entitat de dret públic, la xarxa cameral internacional, els preus assequibles i el canal directe amb ens governamentals per la tramitació de subvencions.

### **Key Words**

Chambers of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, International Department, Commercial Mission, Added Value, Internet, Web 2.0

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## Do Chambers of Commerce have an added value in the web 2.0 era?

### I. INTRODUCTION

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#### I.1. Justification

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Six hundred four thousand seven hundred sixteen. This is the number of small and medium enterprises (SME) active in Catalonia<sup>1</sup>. SMEs represent a 99% of the firms in our territory, being the majority of them micro-firms with none<sup>2</sup> or one paid employee, 344.815 to be precise.

These firms are the main users of the Chamber of Commerce, an entity that works for the general economic activity, defending business interest of firms in their geographical scope regardless of their sector, size or turnover.

Although all of us have heard about Chambers of Commerce, for they are entities present in almost any country of the world that have been offering services to business for several centuries, we tend to know little about their appearance as well as their functions.

Chambers are nowadays government partners in most of the countries, since they offer services which are beneficial to the business sector as a whole. Nevertheless, the main financing instrument for Chambers in Spain and Catalonia -the so-called *recurs cameral* or compulsory membership fee- from where a 70% of the income was obtained<sup>3</sup> was eliminated by the Spanish Government in 2011. This seemed to be signed that the usefulness of Chambers was being questioned.

In parallel, the web 2.0, which implies the rise of the Internet as a reliable source of information and as an alternative to physical presence, seemed to put under threat the role of business specialist that the Chamber had undertaken so far. Several studies find that, increasingly, the Internet is being used as an internationalisation tool, especially among small firms.

With my internship in the International Department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona and seeing a considerable workload -around 2.400 firms hired internationalisation services in 2015<sup>4</sup>- I questioned myself whether the Internet and the web 2.0 were jeopardising the endurance of the international department. I wanted to see which were the added values of the services offered by this department of the Chamber of Barcelona as identifying them is the first step for a further development and for product adaptation to new market threats.

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<sup>1</sup> Idescat, from Central Directory of Enterprises or Directori central d'empreses (DIRCE) belonging to INE [1 of January 2017].

<sup>2</sup> When saying no employees, we refer to micro-firms with natural personality, not juridically constituted.

<sup>3</sup> Àlvarez, D. (2012, July 16). Les cambres negocien amb Economia un nou sistema de Finançament. La Vanguardia, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona. (2015). Memòria d'activitats. Barcelona: Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona.

Due to the vastness of the topic, being Chambers of Commerce a worldwide phenomenon, this thesis will focus on the Chamber of Barcelona. Also, given the diversity of departments and services offered, this work will analyse the role of the international department because I am personally carrying out an internship there and, secondly, because it is of relevant interest for the study of International Businesses, central theme of my bachelor.

## I.2. Methodology

The work is divided in two main areas, the first one covering the history and evolution of Chambers of Commerce and the second one focusing on the international department, commercial missions and the case studies of 5 firms having hired them.

For this work, several types of secondary sources -mainly books- were used specially to clarify the history of Chambers of Commerce worldwide as well as the Chamber of Barcelona in particular.

The annual reports of the Chamber of Barcelona, together with corporate websites and promotional material of the Chambers at national, regional and local level were also of paramount importance for the obtainment of official information.

In addition, academic articles and reports -which can be found in the Internet- about web 2.0 and the relationship with firm internationalisation were basic background for the development of the thesis.

In order to better understand which added values were appreciated by firms, interviews with 5 firms having hired commercial missions with the Chamber of Commerce were done.

This primary source provided essential material to test the hypotheses. Two of the contacts were suggested internally by the Chamber. The other 3 were reached externally, using public sources so as to avoid having a biased perspective. That is, the risk that workers in the chamber suggest only firms that are satisfied. To obtain these contacts, information available online was collected and mass mailings were carried out from which only 3 firms answered saying they were available to be analysed for this thesis.

## I.3. Main objective and hypothesis

The main objective of this work is to find out which are the main added values of Chambers of Commerce in the 2.0 society through the analysis of the international department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona. The main hypothesis are:

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** The status of public right entity defence of the general interest of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, which induces trust among firms, is regarded as a value added by firms hiring their international services.

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** The built-in worldwide chamber network, which implies a net of experts, homologous entities abroad is regarded as value added by firms hiring CCB international services.

**HYPOTHESIS 3:** The price, lower than market equivalents, is regarded as a value added for firms hiring international services.

**HYPOTHESIS 4:** The direct channel that the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona has with governmental entities for the obtainment of subsidies to help finance firms' commercial missions, is regarded as a value added by firms hiring international services.



## II. GENERAL HISTORY OF CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

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### II.1. Origins

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The first Chamber of Commerce ever registered dates back to 1599 and was founded in Marseille, France. Although it had a precursory role, it can be stated that it was an isolated case. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that Chambers of Commerce started appearing in both sides of the Atlantic – mainly north America and the UK- in a more generalised way. During the last third of the eighteenth century, traders' associations that appeared in the British islands, as well as those in the British colonies, were baptised as Chambers of Commerce from the beginning. Later on, throughout the nineteenth century, Chambers of Commerce spread through the great majority of countries in substitution to several kinds of already-existing business associations. It is in this stage where we find the apparition of most Catalan Chambers of Commerce, the Barcelona one dating from 1886. In the eighteenth century, the phenomena of Chambers of Commerce seemed to follow a clear and logical pattern. Simultaneously in the UK and in the British colonies -current USA-, such associations appeared mainly in coastline cities -Boston, 1785; New York, 1768; Charleston, 1773; Liverpool, 1774; Jersey, 1768...-. In fact, the bigger the city was, the more likely it was to have a Chamber. Plus, if the city was highly populated and it had a harbour, the chances increased even more (Bennett, 2012). This correlation between population, harbour, and likelihood of being home to a Chamber seems logical since the trade and business concentration were inevitably higher in such conditions. As stated above, the number of Chambers of Commerce rocketed in the end of the nineteenth century, which also means that it was then that they spread in-land towards industrial areas -that not necessarily had a harbour-.

### II.2. Role

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Chambers emerged as entities **outside the governmental spectrum**, to exert what we would now call business interest representation. They appeared because merchants and traders were not able to access the government on their own and needed a tool to organise their views and present them to the authorities through petitions or memorials (Bennett, 2012). It can therefore be stated that Chambers of Commerce worked with a coalition strategy.

Chamber's bundle of services grew rapidly. Not only did they voice interests, but they also included other services such as offering information through publications, commercial arbitration, coffee house and reading rooms to bring people together and, last but not least, services to promote local businesses nationally and internationally.

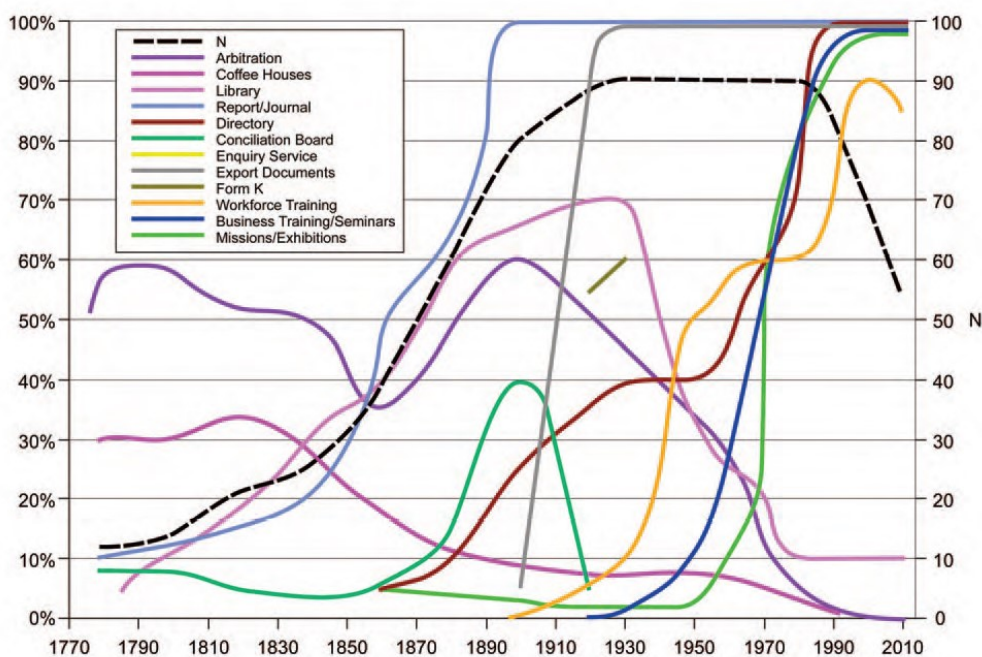
A particularity of Chambers of Commerce was that they tried to **represent business interest** in general terms for the sake of trade as a whole. There was a **trust characteristic** behind Chambers mainly because of two reasons. First, because the advisor was not trying to make money out of it as a market service and secondly because the service maintained an

autonomy, meaning that it was carried out spontaneously and not because the government said to do so.

Nowadays, the role of Chambers has evolved and they have become **government partners** as providers of business support services. Such involvement started over 1917-37 through disseminating information about business opportunities abroad. However, this government-chamber cooperation was generalised in the 80s around the world. Nowadays their service bundle is still that of voice and promotion of local businesses but has expanded to formation services to unemployed, business training and community and government partner in the promotion of local economy, maintaining though a level of autonomy and political non-alignment -although much of its revenues comes from governmental funds-.

As illustrated in the figure, we can more specifically see how the service mix offered by Chambers both in the UK and Ireland has evolved. Services such as business training, participation in missions and exhibitions and workforce training became more widespread from the middle of the twentieth century until nowadays in detriment of other ones such as library, coffee house, arbitration, or conciliation board.

**Figure 1. The Evolution of Chamber Services in Britain and Ireland**



Percentage of chambers offering a given service at each time; lobbying, undertaken by all chambers for all periods, is not shown. N refers to the number of chambers in the sample. Source: Robert Bennett, 2012

### II.3. Typology

In general terms, we can speak about two basic models of chambers of commerce. The continental model present in much of continental Europe, in which Spanish chambers are classified. And the Anglo-Saxon model, in force in the British Islands, as well as the United States of America.

In the **continental model**, chambers are considered public right entities and are therefore governed by public law. In such cases, membership tends to be compulsory for all businesses in the geographical scope of the chamber.

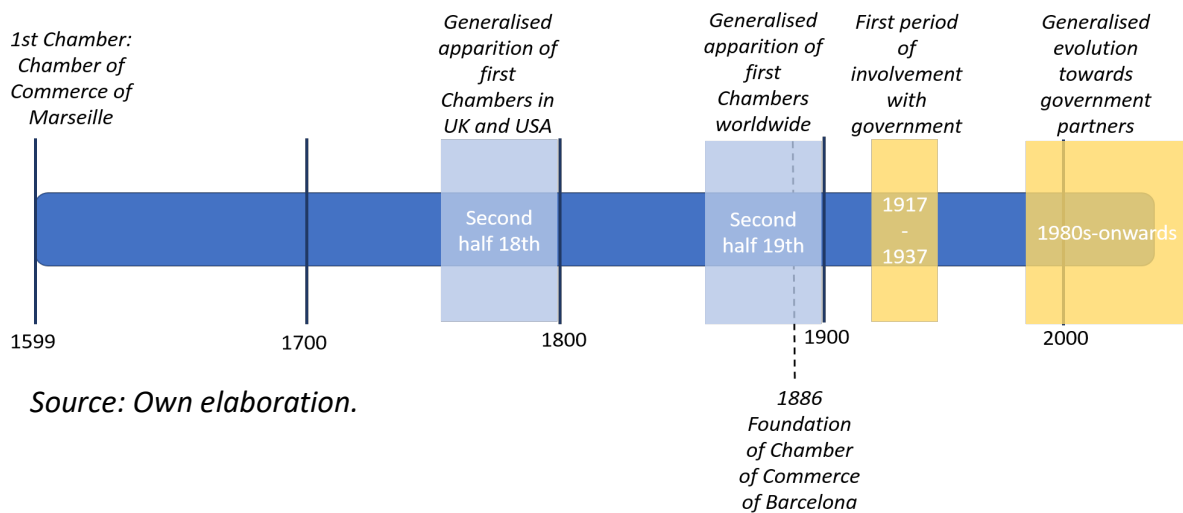
As for the **Anglo-Saxon model**, chambers are considered private business associations and are ruled by private law. Membership is, therefore, voluntary.

In both models, however, we can find parallelisms in term of funding. The resources underpinning the early chambers were mainly obtained through subscriptions, but shifted progressively to include users fee and after the 70s and 80s were supplemented by government contracts.

#### II.4. Summary

In this chapter, we have seen how Chambers of Commerce appeared out of the governmental spectrum as a means to defend business interests. However, their role has evolved until they have become government partners in the promotion of national businesses. Also, two main typologies of Chambers have been identified: the continental model and the Anglo-Saxon model. In the figure we can see a summary of the main periods on history of Chambers of Commerce and the evolution they have undertaken.

**Figure 2. Summarised timeline of main periods on history of Chambers of Commerce.**



Source: Own elaboration.

### III. HISTORY OF THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OF BARCELONA

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#### III.1. Origin 1886-1900

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The 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1886, the Queen Maria Cristina signed a Royal Decree by which Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation were created in Spain. She did so under advice of the minister of Foment, Eugenio Monteros Ríos.

In the above mentioned royal decree, the French model for Chambers of Commerce was copied. Spanish chambers would be **politically non-aligned institutions** that would represent economic interests of those cities having either a harbour or commercial and industrial activities.

Manuel Girona, the founder of the Bank of Barcelona, was elected first president of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Navigation of Barcelona in 1886, which started off without many resources or responsibilities. In fact, the Chamber of Barcelona lacked both money and infrastructures and what kept it alive at the beginning was the fact it was considered a successor for the so-called Junta de Comerç, a historical and prestigious entity respected by all businessmen, that had disappeared in 1847.

When it was created, chamber's membership was voluntary and three months after its foundation -December 1886-, members of the Chamber of Barcelona amounted 336 which were divided into two categories. Businesses paid an annual fee of 300 pesetas and had right to be in the directive board. On the other hand, less important businessman paid an annual fee of 10 pesetas and had no right of vote.

In 1891 the distribution of members was the following: <sup>5</sup>

**Trade section** – 122 members

**Industrial section** – 103 members

**Navigation section** – 79 members

**Total** – 304 members

Although ship-owners were less numerous, they were in fact the most active.

For most of the chambers the start was not easy. The Chamber of Barcelona was not an exception. The **lack of resources** became almost an endemic problem. Moreover, there was also a lack of enthusiasm by its members, whose assistance to annual meetings and assemblies was very scarce. In fact, sometimes they were only 24 members attending the assembly as it happened in 1894 or even 17 in 1897. Considering they were more than 300, participation can be labelled as scarce.

Plus, in 1901 -when the charismatic but already 85-year-old Manuel Girona abandoned the presidency- the Chamber lost members, ending up with only 239 -fewer than when it had been created 14 years earlier-. The decline in membership was an obvious challenge, for it

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<sup>5</sup> La Cambra de Barcelona i els seus presidents (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)

supposed a decrease in the already insufficient financial means. Moreover, the Chamber did not own properties, and had to make do with borrowed offices and bureaux.

Members were concerned by the situation. Salvador Poggio, member of the navigation section, declared in 1897 that the anaemic life of the corporation was pitiful (Cabana i Vancells, 1994). Also, another manager complained how he felt like a doorkeeper instead of a member of the Board of Directors, being his desk placed just next to the entrance door due to lack of space in a building that did not even belong to them.

But this situation was also worsened by the lack of responsibilities and consideration transmitted by the central government, which seemed to ignore chamber's willingness to cooperate. In fact, the chamber's annual reports at that time are full of complaints aimed at the Spanish government for having approved trade treaties or modified export and import tariffs without previous notice.

**Figure 3.**

Year	Members	Income from annual fees (in pesetas)
1886	336	4005
1887	378	8510
1888	331	8300
1889	303	8400
1890	220	6810
1891	290	8945
1892	291	8595
1893	259	9325
1894	223	10990
1895	220	9995
1896	207	9935
1897	192	9795
1898	202	10525
1899	256	10525
1900	239	11085

*Source: "La Cambra i els seus presidents" (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)*

### III.2. First Royal Decree 1902-1910

In 1901 a Royal Decree from the 21<sup>st</sup> June reorganized Spanish Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Navigation; it increased its attributions and resources. Such step was taken after the ever-lasting petitions voiced by Chambers. Although not everything chambers would have liked was accepted, the decree was welcomed. As main improvements, from then onwards Chambers would:

- receive subsidies from the State to cover several expenditures
- have broader responsibilities

- be able to purchase buildings in name of the Chamber itself
- manage mercantile associations
- issue certificates of origin

Unfortunately, due to a governmental crisis, the Decree never came into force. Obviously, the Chamber of Barcelona aimed a respectful complaint to the public powers for not having come into force the attributions promised in the Royal Decree (“Butlletí” from the Chamber of Barcelona, April 1903).

On February 1903, not improving the situation, Chambers from all over Spain headed by the Chamber of Barcelona addressed another letter to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, Trade and Public Works in which they claimed to be given the above-mentioned responsibilities.

When the first president -Manuel Girona- finished its presidency, it was substituted by Joan Sallarès, whose time in the chamber was short and did not help at all to stabilise an entity that lacked motivation and attributions from its birth.

During its first 20 years, the activities of the chamber of Barcelona consisted basically on composing **reports** about economic topics, publishing a periodical **magazine** analysing business opportunities abroad and the economic environment -called Butlletí de la Cambra-.

Good news came finally in 1907 when the Chamber received the authorisation to settle its offices in the famous building of the Llotja de Mar, a privileged emplacement right next to the harbour where most of the commercial exchanges took place.

Nevertheless, funding was still a challenge due to the voluntary character of the membership. The sole solution was to start following the continental European model of chambers of commerce, by which membership was compulsory for all businesses in the geographical scope of the Chamber.

This possibility started being discussed for the first time in 1909, 23 years after the creation of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona. Would this be the solution to the ever-lasting financial problem?

### III.3. Reorganization of Chambers and division 1911-1923

The 29<sup>th</sup> June 1911, the Law of Reorganization of Chambers entered in force. In the text, compulsory membership was not mentioned whatsoever. Nevertheless, it stated that up to a **2% of the contribution paid by merchants and industrials** will be devoted to Chambers of Commerce. Therefore, following the German and French

model an obligatory surcharge on the industrial and commercial contribution would be applied.

By order of this law, another change was applied. Chambers of Industry would from then onwards be a separate entity from chambers of Commerce. Therefore, Chambers of Commerce would no longer have an industrial section. Instead, Chambers of Industry will be an autonomous body with differentiated competences.

From 1912, the year of the **split**, onwards, the Chamber of Commerce kept publishing its habitual periodical magazine called “Butlletí de la Cambra”, while the Chamber of Industry started editing a new piece of rotary press that would be called “La Industria Española”.

It can be said that the year 1911 was a breakthrough for Chambers of Commerce in Spain, for it was confirmed that they had become consultation bodies for the public administration, who became its main funder.

Also, tension emerged between the newly created Chambers of Industry and the already existing business association Foment del Treball, whose scope of representation was specifically the industrial sector.

The 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1912, the two Chambers officially started to work separately. Nevertheless, the division into Chamber of Commerce and Chamber of Industry could now be labelled as a non-sense judging by the first article of the Statute of the entity which states that the Chamber of Industry has as objective promote the industry and commerce, as long as the commercial aspect affects industries<sup>6</sup>. Being this opening sentence already a bit confusing, it can be now seen how both chambers goals were kind of overlapping.

#### III.4. Primo de Rivera 1923-1930

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When the dictator Primo de Rivera took the power in 1923, the Chamber of Commerce stated it would be a positive move for trade, for it would contribute to stability which was highly needed in the streets of the Catalan capital, which suffered from high levels of criminality.

Nevertheless, at the end of the period, when Primo de Rivera exiled himself, the Chamber of Commerce affirmed in one of the reports that they are glad to be back to a situation of political and juridical normality<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Literally: [The Chamber of Industry] “tendrá por objeto el fomento de la industria y del comercio, en cuanto afecte al aspecto comercial de las industrias” (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)

<sup>7</sup> (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)

In general, from 1923 to 1930, the duration of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, the Chamber of Commerce remained still. The reivindicative reports became just lamentations. The sole relevant document was published in 1926 in response to the Royal Order from 4<sup>th</sup> of November of 1926 regulating the industrial production. This Royal Order stated that no society could be constituted, nor its facilities enlarged or transferred without authorisation.

Such statement was an attempt against the economic liberalism for which Catalan bourgeoisie had fought and achieved during the second half of the nineteenth century, which paved the way for private initiative to develop. We can therefore state that the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona took a decisive and brave position by publishing such a complaint during a dictatorship.

### III.5. Second Republic 1930-1936

The 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1931 the Second Republic was proclaimed in a euphoric environment. Alfonso XIII had abandoned the country and there was the general hope that the republic would be able to solve everything the monarchy -including Primo de Ribera Dictatorship- had not been able to arrange.

The Chamber of Commerce perceived these changes with positivity and stated its services were at the orders of Francesc Macià, the president of the Republic. In parallel, according to the Chamber's periodical publication<sup>8</sup>, some Spanish regions showed a certain degree of hostility towards Catalan firms due to the apparent wish of separation from Spain: thus, denying the reception of Catalan personalities, cancelling orders, to mention but a few.

During this period, the Chamber of Industry also cites in its publication -La Industria Española- that the Second Republic together with the Estatut d'Autonomia are great news for Catalonia<sup>9</sup>. In addition, they published the first texts in Catalan. This situation led to a boycott campaign leaded by Spain against Catalan products, which was obviously perceived as an unjustified threat for the development of the Catalan economy.

### III.6. The Parenthesis of the Civil War 1936-1939

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) the Generalitat de Catalunya, Catalan Government, intervened and took control of the Chamber as many of its responsible officers were not available to rule the entity. Therefore, Catalan chambers ended up under the authority of the Council of Economy and Services. Nevertheless, during the

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<sup>8</sup> Butlletí de la Cambra

<sup>9</sup> Literally: "momento de júbilo para Cataluña" (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)



war Chambers continued to offer their administrative services as well as some reports.

In a meeting organised in 1938 in San Sebastián -Franco ruled territory-, the representatives of the Catalan Chambers declared the nullity of all the Acts dating from the period when Catalonia was a Republican territory, from the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1936 to the date of the meeting. They stated that having been written under the power of an organization at the service of an illegitimate service -Republican Catalonia-, they shall be cancelled<sup>10</sup>. In addition, they ensured a staff depuration for those having worked under the republican domain.

### III.7. Post war and Franco Dictatorship (1939-1967)

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During Franco's Dictatorship, Chambers of Commerce in Spain were declared legitimate entities through the "*ley de jefatura del estado*" of the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1939. Although in the above-mentioned law only Chambers of Commerce were mentioned, it was assumed the same type of treatment would apply to Chambers of Industry. Their administrative work would be to keep a **register of exports and imports**, to deliver **certificates of origins** and to **keep track of the businesses** in the economy.

From the Chamber of Barcelona perspective, we can state that they showed submission to Franco's will; vowing loyalty and ensuring the staff depuration. The only complaints the Chamber did during that period were concerning energy resources.

On the one hand, they denounced the alarming delay in the electrification of the railway connecting Maçanet and Portbou -and therefore, Europe-. Such electrification had been planned in 1946 but was still non-functioning in 1952, when the Chamber addressed the report to the Minister of Public Works.

Furthermore, they complained referring to the electricity restrictions taking place in Catalonia which jeopardised the production capacity of many businesses. Although, the Chamber was not able to stop them, they attained more favourable timetables. Those electricity restrictions lasted until the early 1950s.

Finally, since hydraulic energy was not enough, the State distributed coal and oil among the Spanish territory. However, Catalonia was discriminated in the sense that it did not receive a proportional amount of energetic resources considering that the region agglomerated the 40% of economic potential of the state. Thanks to a

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<sup>10</sup> Literally: "se acuerda la nulidad de las actas de la Cámara posteriores al 18 de julio de 1936 por emanar de una organización al servicio de un poder ilegítimo y la depuración del personal que haya trabajado bajo dominio rojo" (Cabana i Vancells, 1994)

reclamation signed by the Chamber of Barcelona, CAMPSA adjudicated an extraordinary share of 1.200.000 liters of oil to Barcelona.

Another relevant issue to consider is that during Franco's dictatorship, the so called "Fira de Mostres" -or Fair of Samples- continued being organised annually by the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Industry. It was meant to be a trade fair to open up to the world. Indeed, it was one of the only occasions where some Catalan firms could acquire the urgently needed machines and equipment for their activities from abroad. Nevertheless, it can be said that celebrating such an exhibition was illogical at that time. First, because in a post war environment people in Catalonia and Spain were suffering from food shortage and rationing. Secondly, because the European neighbouring countries were involved in the World War II. However, the Fira de Mostres was carried out as a strategy to simulate "normality". Also, it was viewed as a leisure activity for ordinary population, who wandered around looking at foreign products they would never be able to afford. In the event organised in 1958, for instance, -the 25<sup>th</sup> edition- 27 countries were represented through 2.817 stands. There were 2 million visitors, from which the clear majority went there just to stroll around an exotic certamen in a dictatorship but without any willingness to purchase.

A remarkable contribution from the Chamber of Barcelona was in February 1959. After they created the Common Market Committee, they handed in a report in which a political reorganization was asked for, as well as a liberalization of the commercial exchanges and the possibility of studying the convertibility of the peseta. All in all, the Chamber proposed measures to integrate Spain in the Common European Market. This report became an essential back-up technical document for the publication of the Stabilization Plan of the Spanish Government in the beginning of the 1960s.

Towards the 1960s also, the then president of the Chamber of Industry -Felix Escala-, wrote a letter suggesting the creation of a Committee of Unification to avoid duplication of services between the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Industry. It was the first step that would lead to the reunification in the future.

### III.8. The reunification of Chambers 1967

After the letter written by Felix Escala in 1960, expressing its desire to simplify some duplicated services both Chambers were offering simultaneously, both entities started publishing commonly two magazines called "*Catalunya Exporta*" [Catalonia Exports] and "*Catàlogo del Exportador*" [The Exporter Catalogue].

The official reunification, however, came to place the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1966 and was approved unanimously by all members present. Thus, merging the two entities into the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Navigation of Barcelona and putting end at a period of separation that had lasted for 55 years. The justification of the reunification was that the Catalan business-class needed an organism that represented their interests collectively.

Josep Valls Taberner was the first president of the re-unified party. Nevertheless, it was soon substituted by Andreu Ribera which was the former president of the Chamber of Industry. It was indeed thanks to an Andreu Ribera's initiative that the merged Chambers image was popularised. He organised press conferences after each monthly meeting of members. During those sessions, he summarised the points discussed and answered questions from the journalists.

After the reunification, the Chamber decreased its articles congratulating the government of Franco, everything without contradicting him. The strategy they decided to undertake was publishing reports with their opinion before the government positioned itself. Thus, if opinions matched, the Chamber congratulated the government for its right decision and if opinions did not coincide, the Chamber kept silent -but its statement had already been made-. In one of these reports, the Chamber repeated how important it was to build highways to improve transportation as well as, ensuring the autonomy of the harbour of Barcelona, essential for economic development.

### III.9. After Franco's death 1975

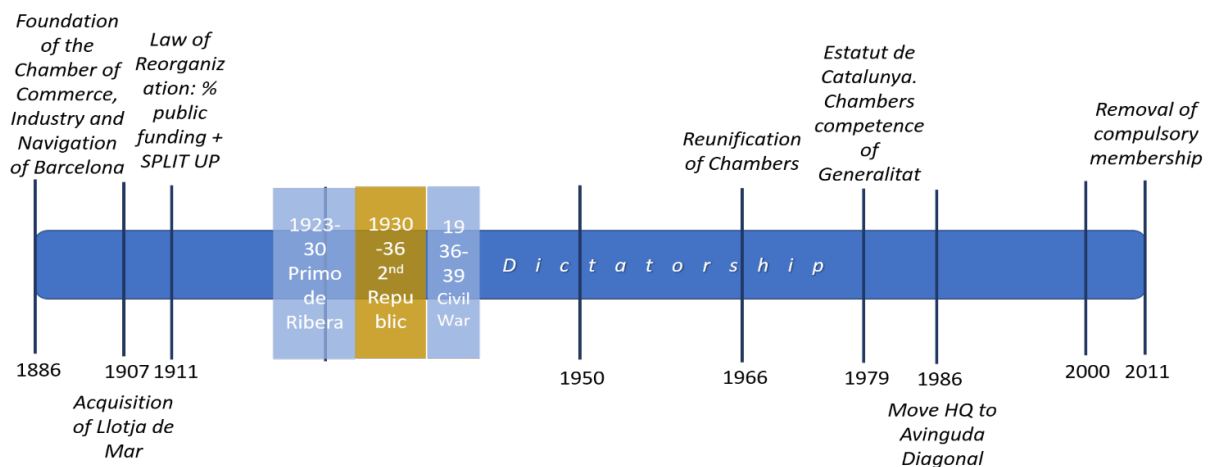
Franco died the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1975. The Chamber of Commerce devoted 6 lines to his death in its following publication. It then declared that a new era was about to start. They took advantage of it by clearly remembering how the Chamber of Barcelona was a politically non-aligned institution in need of open dialogue with the Administration. They aimed to better channel its services to businesses mainly to help them promote their products abroad as well as be a reference in terms of analysis of the current economic situation. The Chamber positioned itself as pro-European again stating that the integration to the Common market was the "to be or not to be" of the Spanish Economy.

During the transition to democracy, the Generalitat de Catalunya approved the *Estatut de Catalunya* through the law of the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 1979. Therein, it was stated that Chambers of Commerce became exclusive competence of the Catalan government through the Department of Commerce and Tourism.

More critical changes took place. Josep Maria Figueres was elected president of the Chamber of Barcelona, being the first president of the institution not coming from the Catalan bourgeoisie. This fact, marked a breakthrough in the history of the Chamber, which openly recognised that there was a new business class emerging, that was no longer tied to aristocratic families. Also, in 1980 the Economic Memory of Catalonia was published in Catalan for the first time in history. Being one of the most important documents the Chamber published, it was considered a relevant statement of intents.

Lastly, in 1986 the Chamber of Barcelona moved to a larger building in Avinguda Diagonal, which is still now home to the administrative offices. It was that same year when Spain officially entered the Economic European Community. This was a turning point in the history of the Chamber of Barcelona, since its bundle of services increased notably regarding foreign trade. They offered, certificates of origin, studies of foreign markets, consultancy services and, most importantly, commercial missions to attractive business destinations.

**Figure 4. Timetable of relevant events for the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona**



Own elaboration.

## IV. ARE CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE STILL USEFUL IN THE WEB 2.0 ERA?

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### IV.1. Web 2.0 and firm internationalisation

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We have seen through the previous chapters that one of the main roles of Chambers of Commerce was helping SME internationalise or start its exporting activities. Chambers initially did so by providing information and reports about foreign markets that were otherwise out of reach of the population, merchants, and firm managers.

Nowadays, Chambers still aim to promote national firms abroad. Nevertheless, the society in which they operate has radically changed. Information about foreign markets that once was only available to a few institutions, is now at the reach of everybody and just a click away using the Internet.

The changes are obvious. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Chamber of Barcelona was founded, if a firm needed to find a distributor abroad it could only do so by being physically in the market. In order to find a telephone number to contact a foreign firm, you needed the help of someone else knowing that firm. Chambers acted as an enabler and as a link contact for national firms towards international markets.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the Internet broadens infinitely these possibilities. In the internet society, there are no borders. Not only are contact details of foreign firms available globally, those firms can also be reached effortlessly via phone, email or through their website. What turns out to be even more relevant is that no matter who can have access to forums, blogs, rankings, and interactive platforms where other users have already left their feedback concerning that firm or issue.

This situation in which information online is complemented and thus enriched by other users' comments has been baptised as *crowdsourcing*<sup>11</sup>, a phenomenon belonging to the Web 2.0<sup>12</sup> revolution.

The Web 2.0 revolution is characterised by the share of interactive information and a web-design focused on the user, being the P2P<sup>13</sup> sites such as blogs and wikis a great example of it. The user becomes an editor/enricher of the sites he visits and not a mere passive reader as it happened with the Web 1.0.

Practical examples of this evolution are: going from digitalised version of an Encyclopaedia -web 1.0- to Wikipedia -web 2.0-, from downloading mp3 files -web 1.0- to hearing and reacting to podcasts -web 2.0-, from just publishing -web 1.0- to participating, reacting and taking part on online content -web 2.0-.

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of crowdsourcing is used to describe a process whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators is used to undertake tasks that were once preserve of a few specialist. (Howe, 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Web 2.0 is an expression that was first used and popularised by the editorial group O'Reilly Media in a conference in 2004. It has been widely used since 2006.

<sup>13</sup> P2P, that is People to People.

There are several studies that prove that the Internet has revealed new paths for exporters to access foreign markets particularly for SME (Sinkovics, Sinkovics and Ruey-Jer 2013) (Bell and Loane 2010). The benefits of the Internet as an internationalisation tool lie on the fact that Web access is available to all firm sizes regardless of their economic resources. The fact that the Internet makes a firm instantly global reduces the importance of economies of scale, the marketing costs, improves contact opportunities, contact between buyers and sellers and, most importantly, changes intermediary relationships.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout centuries, it took time for firms to engage on international activities. They normally did so after mastering the local market or as a resource to overcome a national decrease in demand. Nevertheless, in the Web 2.0 society, a growing number of firms engage on international activities since the beginning, these being baptised as *born-global firms*.

It is obvious that the Internet has paved the way for firms not only to get access to foreign market information but also to commercialise its own products. The ease by which firms find, thanks to online tools, less and less barriers to access a foreign market may put under question the utility of the traditional international services of Chambers of Commerce.

In fact, as Howe (2006) stated, the process named as *crowdsourcing* in the Web 2.0 whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators, is commonly used to undertake tasks that were once preserved to a few specialists.

Literature on the topic, suggested that at the beginning the Internet acted as a *facilitator* that allowed firms to establish a global presence, communicate more efficiently and obtain better information about international markets. Later contributions viewed the Internet as an *enabler* that allows firms to transact online, adopt new business models and operate in supply chain. The most recent contributions see the Internet as a *creator* or *driver* of innovative international opportunities that involve co-creativity and collaboration (Bell and Loane 2010).

The Web 2.0 has allowed enterprises to overcome deficits in knowledge and resources since open-source has put at reach ideas from inside and outside the firm. However, it has been proven that while smaller and younger firms may be perceived as good networkers they do not always manage to properly use online sources. In fact, SME as well as born global firms are likely to rely on the Internet as a reliable information source. However, the quality of online offerings is sometimes questionable and relying on it to a large extent can have a - negative- impact on the future performance of these firms (Bell and Loane 2010).

However, there is a growing number of firms that rely exclusively on the internet to access foreign countries as a means to decrease risk and initial investments. It can be certainly a useful tool to test the market response to a product, however those firms are likely to fall

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<sup>14</sup> (Chatell, 1998, Quelch & Klein, 1996)

into the so-called virtuality gap. This phenomenon consists in generalising the characteristics of a foreign market or the behaviour of foreign customers based only on online transactions, ignoring the actual complexity of it, this leading to a poor performance in foreign markets.

Findings suggest that born-global firms are more likely to fall into the virtuality gap because they rely too much on Internet information and on Internet as a substitute for physical presence. This decreases the possibility of gaining insights from local customers and learn from local intermediaries.

Also, it has been found that relying on the Internet for exporting is positive especially for the retailing context (Xia and Zhang 2010) but less interesting for B2B transactions. That is an interesting insight since firms selling their products at a B2B level, tend to be the users of commercial missions organised by the Chamber of Commerce, and commercial missions are a tool that encourages physical visits to the target market.

Summarising, it has been found that online sales channel has a positive effect on export performance for SME. However, using the Internet as an alternative to physical presence does not mean by default a better export performance. Specifically, if firms focus on the Internet to replace traditional agents, their export performance is negatively affected. In general, born-global firms are more likely to rely on online foreign market information and therefore incur the risk of misreading information which might be detrimental to their export performance. On the other hand, older firms tend to use the Internet as a complement of the traditional exporting methods, which in its turn leads to a better export performance (Sinkovics, Sinkovics and Ruey-Jer 2013).

Therefore, in a world in which firms rely on the Internet as an information provider and as a contact finder; the role of the international department of the Chamber of Commerce may be questioned. Being conscious of it, the services of the chamber have evolved to fit the needs of firms in the 2.0 society. Throughout the following sections we will analyse which are the added values of the internationalising services offered by the chamber of Commerce of Barcelona in an era where the role of the specialists is being put under question.

#### IV.2. International Department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona

To analyse the usefulness of Chambers of Commerce in the 2.0 society, and due to the abundance of such institutions worldwide and the wideness of its actions which make it inviable to analyse them entirely, this study will focus on the international department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, to carry out an in-depth case study to test the 4 hypothesis of this dissertation.

Nowadays, the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona aims to offer competitiveness services to firms in the province of Barcelona. As it has been mentioned, the legal status of the Chamber of Commerce is unique in the sense that it is a public right entity financed by

private funds but which works as a government partner in the promotion of services which foster economy of a region, thus receiving subsidies that help finance its activity.

The Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona now mainly classifies its multiple services into the following categories:

1. **Business**, which includes a wide spectrum of services ranging from rent of business spaces, formation services, issue of certificates, support services for entrepreneurship, juridical and legal consultancy, among others.
2. **Markets**, focused on internationalisation of firms. It includes diplomacy and mediation, commercial missions abroad, customs reports, internationalisation reports, export support, market analysis services, etc.
3. **Talent**, which offers formation services both online and offline.
4. **Financing**, this works as an intermediary to match financing services with businesses and entrepreneurs in need. Thus, offering microcredits, consultancy services on government subsidies and European programs to promote trade.
5. **Technology and Information**, which offers access to certain data bases, networking events, advice on social networks, web positioning or digital certificates, to mention but a few.

Among the several departments of the Chamber of commerce of Barcelona, we shall highlight the international department, which has been an active and essential domain offering services since the creation of the entity and in which I am personally carrying out an internship.

Among the services offered by the international department we find<sup>15</sup>:

- **Commercial Missions:** grouped business trips to countries showing great commercial potential for economic exchanges. Such missions are categorised geographically: Latin-American, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and Europe.
- **eBusiness Sessions**
- **Advice and consultancy for internationalisation**
- **Customs Reports**
- **Documents for internationalisation:** including ATA Carnets, visas, certificate of origin...
- **International Landing Services**
- **Initiation to exportation**
- **Export Manager in-company,** service started in late 2016 which aims to offer an externalised part-time export managers to firms not having the financial capacities to create an own exporting department.

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<sup>15</sup> Retrieved from the Official Website of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona [ [www.cambrabcn.org](http://www.cambrabcn.org) ] as well as from the official catalogue of services. (Cambre de Comerç de Barcelona, 2016)



- **Tailored services**
- **Formation courses**

Five full-time experts are employed directly by the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona and constitute the international department itself. In addition to that, the department hires several full-time externalised, free-lance experts to deal with specific issues and manage the organization of events. In parallel, various interns help undertake the departments functions throughout the year.

Moreover, the Chamber has partnerships with several entities abroad that act as interlocutors at destination and whose role is the search and organization of contacts for Catalan firms contracting Chambers services. Those interlocutors at destination may be the Chamber of Commerce of the country under the scope, government delegations or foreign consultancies with market expertise.

From the 5 employees in the international department, one is fully devoted to the writing of customs reports, another one to the organization of events that take place in Catalonia related to internationalisation and export and the other three undertake the commercial missions abroad as well as manage other related events in Catalonia.

To judge by the workload, resources and workers devoted to it, commercial missions abroad turn out to be one of the main services of the international department. The organization is the following: each expert deals with missions taking place according to a geographical scope, being the division the following: North Africa & Caribbean, Latin-American, Subsaharian Africa & Middle East & Europe.

Throughout the last 10 years the International Department has carried out an average of 13.4 commercial missions annually<sup>16</sup>, the countries to which these missions are done vary depending on the interests shown by firms and also on the market attractiveness. It is relevant also that Catalan Chambers should not offer missions with destinations that overlap. That is; while several Chambers offer grouped trips to Subsaharian Africa, their destinations are complementary. For instance, the Chamber of Tarragona mainly goes to Niger, Kenia, Sierra Leone or Sudan<sup>17</sup>; the Chamber of Barcelona offers services in Ghana, Senegal or Cameroon.

The destinations of grouped missions also adapt to the global economic events rather than following a regular and non-changing pattern. For instance, throughout 2017, extraordinarily five commercial missions to Cuba will be carried out, thus taking advantage of the historical moment of economic openness of the country, whose government is organising several sectorial fairs to attract foreign investors.

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<sup>16</sup> Own calculation with data retrieved from *Memòria d'Activitats de la Cambra de Barcelona* (2006-2015)

<sup>17</sup> Salvat, J. (2017, April 27). *Una referència en l'obertura de mercats a l'Àfrica*. ARA Camp de Tarragona, p. 6.

The way commercial missions are organised is the following: The international department of the Chamber of Commerce detects a country of interest, to which Catalan firms are likely to be attracted and plans a grouped commercial mission which normally takes place in the capital of the chosen country. Commercial missions may be sectorial or multisectorial, depending on the needs of the country.

The international department is in charge of publishing the notice both in the DOGC<sup>18</sup>, in the website of the Chamber of Barcelona<sup>19</sup> and in the unified website of the net of Catalan Chambers. Later, the marketing department continues the diffusion in social networks as well as with mass mailings to firms in Chamber's databases. Dates, cost of the service, objectives, target firms and potential subsidies are all detailed in the brochure and informative PDF.

Interested firms then reach out the responsible officer of the mission, who organises individualized meetings to analyse the viability of the firms in the country where the mission is taking place as well as to better explain the functioning of the trips.

The inscription to the mission is confirmed by the firms after the payment and the fulfilment of a form that details information of the firm area of business, turnover, exportation, product characteristics, competence, to mention but a few.

After that, the international department sends out information about the participating firms to their interlocutors at destination. Those interlocutors may be the Chambers of Commerce of the destination country, with which they have direct contact, independent consultancies, or delegations of ACCIÓ -the Catalan Agency of Competitiveness-. Guided by explanations on the ideal customers and typology of contacts that firms want to find in a market, the preparation of a working agenda starts.

When the mission takes place, the representatives of the firms fly together with the expert designated by the Chamber to the country. Previously, each firm has been handed out a detailed plan of the meetings arranged for them. Those meetings will take place during the days of the trip.

### IV.3. Removal of compulsory membership and *quota cameral*

As seen in the Chapter about the History of the Chamber of Barcelona, since 1911 the Chamber was co-financed, both by service fees and by a percentage funding that came from business taxes collected by the government. Nevertheless, in 2010 a law entered in force in which such financing was removed.

The Spanish and Catalan system of financing of Chambers in force until 2011 was characteristic of the continental model of Chambers, common throughout continental Europe. Membership is compulsory for all the firms operating under the Chambers'

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<sup>18</sup> Diari Oficial de la Generalitat de Catalunya

<sup>19</sup> Cambra Oficial de Comerç, Indústria i Navegació de Barcelona. (2017). Cambra Barcelona. Doing Business. Retrieved 2017, from <http://www.cambrabcn.org/>

geographical scope and a percentage of the corporate tax is aimed at Chambers activity. In Catalonia and Spain this compulsory membership fee is called *quota* or *recurs cameral*. We do not find an English exact translation because in Anglo-Saxon countries membership has never been compulsory and therefore the closest equivalent is *annual membership fee*.

According to an interview to Manuel Teruel, president of the Council of Chambers<sup>20</sup>: in 2010, the last year in which Chambers received the membership fees with normality, only 47% of Catalan firms actually ended up paying it. Since the *quota cameral* is a percentage of the corporate tax declared by firms, only those having economic profits must pay it.

The individual contributions were also rather low. According to Teruel in 2010 -last year of normality-, a 12.5% of the firms paid between 20-60€, a 5.5% paid between 60-100€, the 3.9% between 100-300, the 1.75% between 300-1000€ and only a 0.85% paid more than 1000€.

Chambers of Commerce in Spain have always collected the membership fees corresponding to 2 years earlier. In 2008, they collected the revenues from 2006 that accounted for a total of €283 million. In 2011, they collected the revenues from 2009, which had decreased to €191 million. Such decrease can be explained by the crisis, which caused many firms not to have positive results and thus not to pay the contribution, and by the decrease on the firms demanding Chambers services due to the poor economic activity.

Spanish Chambers saw their financing means threatened again with the approval of the Royal Decree-Law 13/2010 from the 3<sup>rd</sup> December. By order of this decree membership to Chambers of Commerce in Spain became voluntary, thus deleting the so-called *quota cameral*.

According to the BOE<sup>21</sup>, the suppression of this compulsory fee responded to 2 reasons: First, it would liberate the 2 and a half million enterprises in activity in Spain and would contribute to foster their competitiveness. Secondly, it would be an incentive for Chambers to undertake their functions and duties more efficiently. Since Chambers would need to attract enterprises to purchase a series of services that would inevitably become more expensive, Chambers would be forced to modernise and improve the quality of them.<sup>22</sup>

According to the law, the financing of Spanish Chambers now lays on the following points:

- a) Voluntary membership fee
- b) Revenues from their services offered to firms
- c) Rents and revenues from Chambers' Real Estate
- d) Specific subsidies or donations

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<sup>20</sup> (Díaz-Varela, 2011)

<sup>21</sup> Boletín Oficial del Estado

<sup>22</sup> Literally: "La reforma hace voluntaria la pertenencia a las Cámaras y la contribución a la ahora denominada cuota cameral. Su eliminación liberará de recursos [...] a dos millones y medio de empresas activas en el mercado [...]. La voluntariedad de la pertenencia a la Cámaras debe ser un incentivo para que cumplan sus funciones con mayor eficiencia[...]. Real Decreto-Ley 13/2010 from the 3<sup>rd</sup> December.

e) Revenue from lending or credit operations they undertake

Due to this modification in the basic financing rules, now Spanish Chambers of Commerce can only cover a 30% of their activities thanks to the membership fees, a narrow amount compared to the more than 70% those fees helped to finance before the restructuring<sup>23</sup>. In numerical terms, Spanish Chambers estimated to collect in total around €65 million after the removal of the compulsory membership fee. Compared to the €283 million they collected effortlessly before the crisis, the decrease is obvious and dramatic. Due to such change, staff restructuring was undertaken in all the Spanish Chambers, which employed directly around 3.300 workers<sup>24</sup>.

*IV.3.1. Effect on firms hiring international department services*

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In the following figure, we can see the number of firms hiring any of the international department services in the Chamber of Barcelona during the period from 2006 to 2015. The peak in 2006 may be attributed to a different count method that did not avoid duplications, as it seems very unlikely that the number of firms reached such a maximum. Later, the figures seem to stabilize with ups and downs that can be associated to both economic and financial factors.

On the one hand, the decrease in 2008 can be directly associated to the financial crisis that hit almost all kind of enterprises but had a devastating effect on SME which tend to be the target firm for international department services in the Chamber of Barcelona. Seeing their revenues decrease, less firms hired international services.

The decrease in 2011 is caused by the removal of the compulsory membership in 2010, due to which the Chamber had a dramatic decrease in revenues and was forced to increase their service prices and decrease their bundle of offers, which deterred firms from hiring them. Ever since the removal of the so-called *quota* or *recurs cameral*, the number of firms hiring international services in the Chamber of Barcelona has kept low compared to previous years. This fact, is an evidence that allows us to state that one of the differential features of Chambers services is the affordability of a good quality services.

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<sup>23</sup> Àlvarez, D. (2012, July 16). *Les cambres negocien amb Economia un nou sistema de Finançament*. La Vanguardia, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Díaz-Varela, M. (1 de August de 2011). *Les cambres negocien amb Economia cofinançar els seus serveis a pimes*. La Vanguardia, pág. 53.

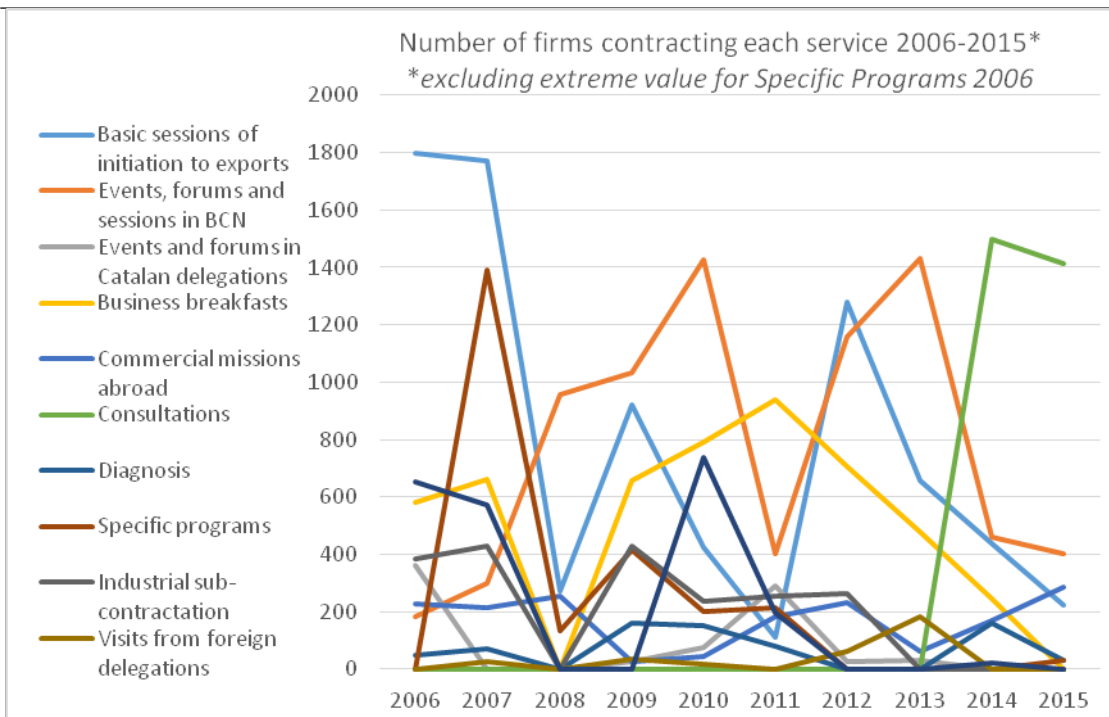
**Figure 5. Firms participating in services by international department of the CCB.**



Own elaboration with data retrieved from Memòria d'Activitats de la Cambra de Barcelona 2006-2015

In the next figure, we can see the evolution of the number of firms hiring or participating in each service of the international department from 2005-2016. The value for Specific Programs in 2006 has been excluded for the display of the graph, because being an extreme value it distorted the figure.

**Figure 6. Number of firms hiring each service to the international department of CCB.**



Own creation with data retrieved from Memòria d'Activitats de la Cambra de Barcelona 2006-2015

## V. CHAMBERS' ADDED VALUE

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To test the hypotheses exposed in the Introduction section, knowledge acquired during my internship in the international department together with public writings, laws, regulations and official material from Chambers of Commerce will be used.

On the one hand, corporate websites and promotion material from the Chamber of Spain, the Chamber of Barcelona and the International Department will be analysed so as to find out which are the differential traits they highlight when promoting their services and conveying information towards the public. On the other hand, conversations with experts from the international department and marketing department of the Chamber of Commerce will be taken into account.

To have an external perspective, several firms having hired services to the international department will be interviewed to analyse the reasons that pushed them to work together with the Chamber of Commerce, which values added they consider more relevant and also to discover which role does the Internet play for them in their internationalisation process.

Some of the firms interviewed are suggested internally by experts having undertaken commercial missions. Other firms are contacted using public information available online so as to avoid having only feedback from firms suggested internally by experts which could bias the information.

### V.1. The testimony of the Chambers clients: interviews

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Cases from five firms were studied with individual interviews<sup>25</sup>. As stated above some of the contacts were suggested by the international department and some others were reached externally to avoid having a biased perspective, risking that the international department only suggested firms that were satisfied with the services.

The five firms belong to different sectors and are at different stages of the business cycle. Some of them have more than 300 years of experience while others are just start-ups. Despite their differentiated profiles, they all recurred to the Chambers help and hired a commercial mission abroad.

To preserve the privacy of the speakers, firms will be described and enumerated at the beginning but results and comments will not be personalised. Also because of privacy, not all the interviews were recorded and transcripts will not be published, although if needed for justifications they could be made available under the speakers' permission.

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<sup>25</sup> García, Antón, CEO RokDesign Barcelona, (April 2017).

Gelado, Mireia, Export Manager of J. Vilaseca Barcelona, (April / 2017).

Massés, Helena, Export Manager of Gorgy Timing Spain Barcelona, (April 2017).

Rodríguez, Rafael, Founder of Freeway Logistics Barcelona, (April / 2017).

Vidal, Marta, Export Manager for Telic Group Barcelona, (April 2017).

All interviewed by Minerva Estruch-Rectoret.

These are the interviewed representatives together with the firms and the services they have hired to the international department of the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, ordered by chronological order of the interviews.

#### **ROK DESIGN – Antón García – Commercial mission to Saudi Arabia 2016**



Antón García is the founder of ROK DESIGN a firm specialized on the design of spaces, more concretely in the domain of industrial design. The firm was founded in 2012 and is located in Barcelona; although the founder comes from Galicia where he started its studies of industrial engineering, which he complemented them with a specialized master on urban furniture design in Barcelona.

The team is constantly analysing how people use furniture at home, in the office or in urban environments. The services they offer may be categorised in 3 categories: Furniture & Illumination, corporate design and infoarchitecture 3D.

Although we are talking about a micro-firm, Rok design has collaborated with renowned professionals such as Carles Riart (National Design Prize 2011) and Diego Slemenson (Jorge Pensi Design Studio) among others.

In the search of growth possibilities, Antón García, contacted the Chamber of Commerce in order to receive advice on how he could expand his business. From the Chamber of Barcelona, he was redirected to the international department which suggested joining the commercial mission to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, although specifically concentrating on Saudi Arabia. That was in 2016. Being a start-up made him trust a public entity rather than a private one and look for affordable services.

Although ROK DESIGN had already had several international sales, the majority of them were reactive sales of specific contacts made in fairs or from word-to-mouth. In general terms, it can be stated that the mission to Saudi Arabia was the first active action undertaken to find international customers.

#### **TELIC GROUP – Marta Vidal – Commercial mission to Morocco and Algeria 2015**



Marta Vidal is the export manager of Telic Group, a firm from the hospital sector. They commercialise several product lines for pharmacies, sports people, and physiotherapists. Nevertheless, the 90% of their turnover comes from hospital material. They have been

exporting for 25 years and have sales to 70 countries. Therefore, they are used to traveling and organising commercial missions on their own.

They count on around 80 employees and although they are used to planning agendas by themselves they value highly the services offered by the Chamber and other public entities such as ICEX both for commercial missions and participation in sectorial Fairs mainly because they consider them time saving and very cost-effective.

Their main criteria when hiring the commercial mission to Morocco and Algeria with the Chamber in 2015 was that the dates fitted perfectly to their internal calendar, in which they have already-planned trips that cannot be skipped.

### **GORGY TIMING – Helena Massés – Commercial mission to Mexico 2016**



Helena Massés is the export manager from the Spanish division of Gorgy Timing a French firm that employs 45 people in Catalonia and that commercialises tools for time measurement in the industrial sector. Among their products we can find both analogical and digital clocks for industrial use, time servers, electronic screens and almost anything it has to do with time measurement to be applied in factories and industries in a wide range of sectors.

They have been active since 1974 and nowadays a 50% of their turnover comes from international sales. As a subsidiary, they are in charge of some geographical areas that include Spain and Latin America. Since the French mother firm had already used several internationalisation services from French Chambers of Commerce and Embassies, they decided to look for equivalent institutions in Catalonia.

This is how they ended up hiring a commercial mission to Mexico in 2016 in the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, from which they obtained very fruitful contacts and market knowledge, according to the interview.

### **J. VILASECA – Mireia Gelado – Commercial mission to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait 2016**



Mireia Gelada, export manager for J. Vilaseca, a paper factory established in Catalonia since 1714 specialised on manufacturing of paper products targeted to the stamping markets, advertising, security, labelling, to mention but a few.



As a firm with 202 employees and a wide experience in the sector, they are distributing products to around 60 different countries. Their historical background allows them to have a deep knowledge of the sector which they complement it with advanced technology to offer the best quality solutions.

They are specialised in offering customised products to national and international customers. Being present in several countries they are used to managing the introduction to a market by themselves. Nevertheless, they value help in markets they have never been to.

J-Vilaseca had participated in missions to Kazakhstan, Romania and Egypt organised by the Chamber. In the specific case of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the support was needed as it is a very complex market both culturally and economically. There are difficulties in obtaining the visas and women are deprived from freedom in many areas. That is the main reason why the mission was appreciated and hired by J. VILASECA.

### **FREEWAY LOGISTICS – Rafael Rodríguez – Commercial mission to Mexico 2016**



Rafael Rodríguez is the founder of Freeway Logistics, a firm created in 2009 by professionals coming from different sectors of logistics and transportation. Their business activity is acting as a global logistics operator, so, advising their customers on services and transportation means that better suit their needs.

They are a small firm (2 employees) but they offer logistics services on road, railway, air and water. Their internationalisation strategy depends mainly on word-to-mouth and networking carried out in previous jobs. They also rely highly on a network of independent forwarders they belong to which gives access to information about international transportation structures.

Normally they make do with the contacts in this independent forwarders' network to cover Asia and Middle East. However, their resources do not cover the markets of Latin America. That is why they decided to hire the commercial mission to Mexico with the Chamber in 2016.

#### **V.2. Public right entity**

**HYPOTHESIS 1 (H1)** reads: The status of public right entity and defence of the general interest of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, which induces trust among firms, is regarded as an added value by firms hiring international services.

### V.2.1. Formal approach

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Primarily, it needs to be analysed whether the affirmation is true according to objective documents. On the one hand, laws regulating Chambers will be considered in order to see how Chambers are defined in official writings. Secondly, corporate documents and promotion material belonging to the Chamber will be analysed to see how they introduce themselves to firms and also to value whether they consider their own status to be a value-added.

#### V.2.1.1. Literature on the topic

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As mentioned in the first chapter, literature on the topic recognises that, at least in the beginning, there was a trust characteristic behind Chambers mainly because of two reasons. First, because the advisor was not trying to make money out of it as a market service and secondly because the service maintained an autonomy, meaning that it was carried out voluntarily and by willingness to help the whole business community (Bennet, 2011).

#### V.2.1.2. Official public writings

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In the public writings<sup>26</sup> regulating Chambers in Catalonia, Chambers of commerce are corporations of public right, which maintaining a political non-alignment, are under the scope of the Government, which has legislative competences over them. Chambers of Commerce are consultation bodies of the public administration and have their own legal status. Chambers also have autonomy and independence to manage their monetary resources as well as the bundle of services they offer to firms.

By law, in Catalonia there needs to be at least a Chamber in each province (Girona, Lleida, Tarragona) and two in the province of Barcelona. In addition, in each province there can be other delegations belonging to the main Chamber. Each Chamber has a geographical scope, to which firms are subscribed depending on their constitution address.

As mentioned, Chambers are in charge of managing several public issues such as: business census, elaborate economic studies, elaborate statistics and analysis of trade, industry, navigation and tourism and promote internationalisation of Catalan firms and enhance exportation to mention but a few.

As far as the promotion of the internationalisation is concerned, each Chamber is free to offer the services it considers appropriate to fulfil the goal. As seen before, commercial missions are one of the main tools by which Chambers help Catalan firms go abroad.

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<sup>26</sup> Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

*V.2.1.3. Chambers corporate presentation*

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From the Chamber of Barcelona perspective, their promotional material is essential to understand which traits they identify as differential. Corporate websites and catalogues and videos are the showcase for their services.

In a corporate video concerning the whole entity<sup>27</sup>, they define themselves as trustful because the Chamber represents all kind of businesses; from self-employed, small business owners, medium sized businesses to large corporations. The Chamber offers services to all sort of businesses regardless of type, size, or sector; since 1886 working for the defence of the business activity.

Somehow, Chambers must offer their services to any kind of firm without discrimination on their type. Hence, the potential profitability of the business hiring the service is not relevant. The Chamber offers a neutral position that consultancies, private firms or banks that may offer similar services cannot offer because of their private nature, which forces them to have profit-making as the main goal. This means that firms that would probably be rejected by private entities due to low-return on investment or that would be charged with harsh pluses, can be assisted by the Chamber of Commerce.

*V.2.2. Empirical approach*

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We have seen objectively that Chambers of Commerce have a unique legal status, functioning under the private law principles but with the label of public right entity because they serve the general business interest with no distinction on business type. Nevertheless, it needs to be tested whether this characteristic is regarded as a value-added by firms hiring international services.

Four out the five firms to which the follow-up was carried out state that the status of public right entity of the Chamber conveys a message of trust. Only one of the firms states that the relevant matter is that dates of the mission match with their firm's agenda, regardless of who organises it.

Some state that they feel -as a firm- automatically represented by the Chamber of Commerce because they know is the entity defending business activity in their geographical scope.

Firms value the neutrality of the Chamber status. Years of experience as a historical entity - since 1886- are also considered relevant. The fact that the Chamber is partner to the public administration is also considered a characteristic that helps convey the message of trustworthiness.

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<sup>27</sup> Cambra de Barcelona. (2016, March 29). Barcelona Chamber of Commerce 2016. Retrieved April 2017, from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9CrkChFyVA>

One of the firms mentions how private consultancies are too profit oriented and would only matter to sell their service and, in addition, may sell the firm's data to third parties, something they understand the Chamber will not do because of their status.

In that same line, some highlight that they value how, thanks to the being a public right entity, the Chamber provides help and services to firms that have less guarantees of success (lower ROI) or to not-yet-profitable start-ups that would not find support in the private sector.

As stated by several interviewees, when firms seek help to develop their business activity, and this includes internationalising, the first thing they do is to consult public entities that offer a service that may help them in a less profit-oriented way than private consultancies. This is why they consider essential that the chamber is labelled as a public right entity that defends the general business interest regardless of the type, size or turnover.

Only one of the interviewees questions whether the proposal of participating on a mission was adequate for its firm and to what extent it was only sold as a business opportunity for the Chamber. Being conscious that commercial missions are useful when you have a clear decision of to which market to go. If you are not sure about it, the Chamber may advice to enrol in a mission and this might not be de appropriate market for the firm, states the interviewee.

In general firms value the positioning of respect that its status provides, they would rather hire services to an institution than to a firm such a consultancy.

### V.2.3. Summary

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Literature on the topic has been cited to highlight the trust factor the status of chambers conveys, together with official texts from the law regulating Chambers in Catalonia and corporate information from the Chamber of Barcelona. Four out of the five interviewees consider the public right entity status to be a determinant factor in justifying their decision to purchase an international service.

Therefore, we can state that hypothesis 1 is supported both formally and empirically. Firms hiring commercial missions in the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona regard the status of public right entity as a value added.

### V.3. Worldwide network

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**HYPOTHESIS 2:** The built-in worldwide chamber network, which implies a net of experts, homologous entities abroad is regarded as value added by firms hiring international services.

### V.3.1. Formal approach

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#### V.3.1.1. Official public writings

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The government tries to encourage Chambers to build up a network of contacts both at regional, national and international level. From the Catalan government, we see that Article 14 of the Law 14/2002 about Chambers in Catalonia considers that it is important that chambers establish agreements with other institutions in order to better fulfil their goals and activities.

Therefore, by law<sup>28</sup>, Chambers are allowed and encouraged to establish cooperation agreements with other Chambers and also with private and public institutions in the national territory and also abroad<sup>29</sup>.

In addition of contacts and networks Chambers may build with other entities nationally and internationally, they may also decide to create their own delegations abroad to better cover the territory and improve the quality of services offered.

This is covered by the Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23<sup>rd</sup> of July which modifies the Royal Decree 786/1979 of 16<sup>th</sup> March which establishes the rules for Spanish Chambers of Commerce established abroad. Basically, the modification mentions that creation of Spanish Chambers abroad will be made easier in order to respond to the growing number of Spanish of firms wanting to internationalise and in need of this service.

The original Decree recognises the work carried out by Spanish Chambers abroad in the field of paving the way for Spanish exports to increase. Furthermore, it highlights the collaborations there have been between Spanish Chambers and Spanish Embassies. The Decree emphasizes that cooperation is important between national Chambers and their international representations; being advised a coordination plan on issues of general interest.

International delegations of Spanish Chambers are in charge of providing general commercial information to interested Spanish firms, promote Spanish products abroad, assist Spanish exporters, intervene in solving international disputes through mediation, and issue of certificates of origin, to mention but a few.

#### V.3.1.2. Chambers' corporate presentation

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At a Corporate level, we can prove how the network of contacts of Chambers of Commerce is a relevant characteristic by analysing official promotional material and websites.

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<sup>28</sup> Article 14. Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

<sup>29</sup> Literally: "Per complir millor llurs finalitats, les cambres poden establir convenis o altres instruments de col·laboració entre elles [...] amb les administracions públiques i amb altres ens públics o privats d'àmbit nacional o internacional."



Lastly, at a local level, the Chamber of Barcelona states in their corporate video (Cambra de Barcelona, 2016) that Chambers of Commerce comprise a worldwide network operating in 130 countries, having the Chamber of Barcelona an active and important role. They claim to maintain exchanges and have agreements with other Chambers, firms and key institutions at an international, national and regional level.

One of the interlocutors at destination for the Catalan Chambers is the entity of ACCIÓ, belonging to the Generalitat de Catalunya and labelled as Agency for Competitivity. We can see in their website a display of their delegations abroad, whose function is to promote Catalan business internationally and attract foreign investment to Catalonia.

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**Figure 9. Delegations of ACCIÓ**

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Source: Retrieved from [gencat.cat/accio](http://gencat.cat/accio) [26/04/2017]

### V.3.2. Empirical approach

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All the interviewees consider the global chamber network to be a value-added. One of the facts they value unanimously is that the Chamber has interlocutors that are physically at the destination. They find this a key strength and an essential characteristic that allows them to create high quality agendas.

Some interviewees underline how you can go much further in negotiations to set up a meeting when the Chamber does it on your behalf. Speaking in name of the chamber of commerce, not only opens the doors to contact their homologous entities abroad but also private firms which may be a firm's potential client. This fact may be linked to the previous hypothesis. As one of the interviewees states, being a public entity makes it easier to be listened to, both at public and private level, as the figure of Chamber of Commerce has equivalents worldwide.

One of the firms underlines, specifically, how delegates at destination working for the Chamber of Barcelona are much more qualified than those working for ICEX, a public entity with which they hired a mission in the past.

Apart from valuing the usefulness of delegates abroad and the network of contacts they can establish, responsible of the firms interviewed also find interesting the fact of having access

to contacts inside the Chamber of Barcelona itself. This type of networking helps them has somebody they can refer to when in need in the future.

In fact, several firms stated that they do not consider essential for the Chamber to carry a post- follow-up of the mission, as this seems to be internal task for the firm. What they do highly value is that the representative of the Chamber of Barcelona who accompanied them to the mission, keeps being available and easily at reach when the mission comes to an end. They also find relevant being able to talk with the delegate at destination, and carry-out an interactive preparation of agendas. Visiting physically, when in the mission, the offices where those delegates work is also regarded positively; as well as the visits or interviews they may carry out with the Embassy or the country's Chamber of Commerce.

The physical presence in the country where the agenda is carried out is essential to arrange quality meetings. However, some of the interviewees state that not all the 100% of the contacts were the perfect profile of customer they wanted. Also, that the contacts of the Chambers can very effectively arrange the meetings but that, as it is comprehensible, success is not ensured.

Normally, the meetings are useful to establish a first contact to which the follow up will be done virtually. It is rare that agreements are closed in the first visit. Nevertheless, this first visit seems to be essential to show interest and contact and orders are later organised via email without problem.

In general, representatives interviewed value the network the Chamber has abroad, especially the physical presence of delegates of cooperative entities in countries and being able to exchange ideas with those representatives to build up a good planning of interviews appropriate to the needs of the firm.

Also, they are glad to have contacts inside the Chamber of Barcelona once the mission finishes and to have access to future services of the Chamber. Some state that after participating in the mission with the Chamber they discovered many other services of the Chamber itself and of complementary entities such as Foment.

### *V.3.3. Summary*

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Public law both at Spanish and Catalan level has been analysed to prove how institutions allow and encourage the creation of a global chamber network. Also, the geographical dispersion of delegates belonging to the Chamber of Spain, Chamber of Barcelona and Acció has contributed to visualise the international reach of the network. Parallely, firms agree unanimously that the network and contacts the chamber has access to was a determinant in justifying their purchase decision.

Hence, we can state that H2 is supported both formally and empirically and that the global network of contacts the Chamber has access to is a value-added for the international department.



## V.4. Affordable prices

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**HYPOTHESIS 3:** The price, lower than market equivalents, is regarded as an added value for firms hiring international services.

### V.4.1.1. Official public writings

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According to the Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23rd of July, Chambers of Commerce receive subsidies assigned by the Government so as to encourage the promotion of services that serve the general business interest.

Moreover, in article 19 of the same Decree<sup>30</sup>, where sources of financing for Chambers of commerce are listed, subsidies of the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism are considered the 3<sup>rd</sup> source of income.

This economic help are sunk investments made by the government that help decrease the market price of the services Chambers offer and therefore make them more affordable to SME, the main customer for internationalisation services.

### V.4.1.2. Chambers corporate presentation

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The Chamber of Barcelona is conscious that affordable prices is an attractive characteristic of their services. In fact, in their corporate video, they state that the Chamber of Barcelona works to offer affordable and quality services<sup>31</sup>.

Prices for commercial missions with the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona vary according to the market but are normally around 1.350€+VAT, being 550€ the inscription fee and 800€ the preparation of the working agenda and meeting plan. Final prices end up being around 1630€, including VAT. This price includes meetings with the responsible of the market in the Chamber of Barcelona, individualised agenda, contact and feedback from interlocutors at destination, logistic support and post mission follow-up.

There are market equivalents organised by other entities and sectorial associations such as CECOT or ACCIÓ itself, all of them tend to be equivalent in terms of price. In the private market, however, prices are much higher as commercial missions tend to be individual and receive no public funding.

### V.4.2. Empirical approach

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Four out of the five interviewed firms find the affordable price a determinant characteristic for hiring the mission. There was one firm that stated that dates were more relevant than price when hiring a commercial mission.

Among the other four firms there was unanimity in declaring that the service had a very competitive price. The firms with international experience valued how cost-effective the

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<sup>30</sup> Royal Decree 1717/2004 of 23<sup>rd</sup> of July

<sup>31</sup> Cambra de Barcelona. (2017, April 10). Internacionalitza't amb Cambra de Barcelona. Retrieved April 2017, from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjgWXqcSU5o>

service was and how it helped them externalise the activity of agenda planning in a very time-saving way. On the other side of the spectrum, the start-up interviewed and firms with no export department mentioned how they knew could count on the Chamber for a service that they could not afford in the private sector.

Hence, medium-sized firms with export department consider the price lower than the cost it would have doing the same work internally; while firms with no export department value consider they could not have had access to that service otherwise.

Also, one of the interviewees states that she knows market equivalents in the private sector are much more expensive, since she used a consultancy just for advice on international issues and the price was greater than what the Chamber charges for commercial missions abroad, which implies an active and personalised research.

#### *V.4.3. Summary*

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The Spanish law regulating Chambers of Commerce regulates the assignation of subsidies to Chamber in order to encourage them to provide affordable services. In addition the Chamber uses this strength when promoting their services. Empirically, four out of the five firms state how the affordable price was an issue of paramount importance when hiring the service.

Hence, we can state that H3 is supported both formally and empirically and that the affordable prices of the commercial missions are an added value for firms hiring international services.

### *V.5. Direct Channel for subsidies*

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**HYPOTHESIS 4:** The direct channel that the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona has for the obtainment of subsidies to help finance firms' commercial missions, is regarded as a value added by firms hiring international services.

#### *V.5.1. Formal approach*

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##### *V.5.1.1. Official public writings*

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According to the Catalan law regulating Chambers<sup>32</sup>, they are assigned the role of managing subsidies and public funds aimed at firms to foster their activities. Basically, the Catalan government identifies the Chamber as an official intermediary to channel subsidies towards firms.

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<sup>32</sup> Llei 14/2002, de 27 de juny, de les cambres oficials de comerç, indústria i navegació de Catalunya i del Consell General de les Cambres

#### *V.5.1.2. Chambers corporate presentation*

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At Spanish level, the Chamber of Commerce of Spain publishes on its corporate website how they have the legal role to manage European structural funds, as they are the intermediary that channels European funds towards Spanish SME. Most of the programs they manage are grouped in the European Fund for Regional Development<sup>33</sup> which aims to pave the way for internationalisation to take place as well as to promote technological development and innovation.

In fact, on their corporate site they enumerate the programs that Chambers are legally entitled to manage during the period from 2014 to 2020, these being: Programa Operativo de Crecimiento Inteligente, InnoCámaras, Support to Ecoinnovation for SME, TICCámaras, Fomento de la eAdministración en la Pyme, Plan Integral de apoyo a la competitividad del comercio minorista en España, Tourism Program, Xpande, Xpande Digital, International Promotion Program, Business support program to women, Formación profesional dual, España Emprende, Support to entrepreneurial spirit.

At a regional level, the Council of Catalan Chambers also states how they are in charge of managing the Enterprise Europe Network which involves a series of opportunities and services, ranging from open source databases, to subsidies to promote competitiveness.

Lastly, at local level, In the official website of the Chamber of Barcelona, the posts promoting each of the missions contain information about the subsidy the Chamber will manage on behalf of the firm. As mentioned above, these subsidies can mainly come from three sources: European Enterprise Network at European level, Camara de España at the Spanish level and ACCiÓ at the Catalan level. The amount of the subsidies varies according to the market and the cost of the trip. However, it tends to be around 700€ for closer countries such as Morocco or Tunisia and 1200€ for further countries such as Cuba or Dominican Republic.

#### *V.5.2. Empirical approach*

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There is unanimity in considering that the help and direct channel to obtain subsidies are a very attractive characteristic of Chamber's services. Not only do firms value the fact of receiving money from the government to finance their internationalising activities, they consider of a greater importance the fact that the Chamber deals with all the bureaucracy involved.

According to some interviewees the subsidy helps to cover travel costs and represents a financing of around 30% of the mission, including inscription price, agendas, flights and hotels.

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<sup>33</sup> Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional (FEDER)

All of the firms consider the direct channel for the obtainment of subsidies to be a differential point for the Chamber. Two firms state that they would not have hired the commercial service if there was not the subsidy. Another firm states that subsidy is an incentive, and that they would not have had time to manage the red tape on their own.

Although this aspect is highly valued, there are 2 firms that express some criticisms. One of them was, in the end, not able to receive the subsidy for problems at the Chamber of Spain level. Although the Chamber had never guaranteed it a 100%, the firm not receiving the subsidy felt disappointed at receiving the news, as this financial help was essential for them. Another firm also complains about the unjustified time it takes to receive the subsidy, which they consider it should be payable the same year the mission was carried out and not so many months later. However, both of them express understanding when saying that this is not the Chamber's fault but a governmental issue.

### *V.5.3. Summary*

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It has been proved how Catalan law regards chambers as intermediary to channel subsidies to firms. Also, it has been seen at Spanish, Catalan and Barcelona level how Chambers broadcast information about subsidies that can be obtained when hiring their services. Interviewees underline how obtaining a subsidy was a reason that encouraged them to hire the service of commercial missions. Two of the firms, however, show disappointment: one because it was not able to receive the subsidy and the other because reimbursement takes too long.

Hence, H4 is supported both formally and empirically and it can be stated that the direct channel Chambers have for the obtainment of subsidies and the management of red tape involved are regarded as added values by firms hiring international services. Nevertheless, there is still room for improvement concerning the liquidation time for subsidy reimbursement and guarantees for obtainment.

### *V.6. Is the Internet a threat to Chamber services? Strengths and weaknesses*

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Firms were asked about the role of the Internet in their internationalisation process to see whether it was a threat to Chamber's international services, especially commercial missions. Three out of the five firms stated that they used the internet as a source of information both about the market and contacts proposed in the mission agenda parallelly to the information proposed by the Chamber during the preparation of the mission. They made use of the internet mostly to get to know firm profiles as well as to obtain general economic information about markets, growing sectors, economic situation, on-going investments, and politics of the country they were travelling to.

One of the firms with more international experience and with an own export department stated that in parallel to the mission they carried out a market study of the country on their own, using Internet information as a main source.

All the firms stated that during the process of agenda creations, while they exchanged information with interlocutors at destination they used the internet to contrast whether some of the contacts suggested suited their needs.

The internet is regarded as a wide source of information by all the interviewees. Four out of the five firms studied declare that, using the Internet, they might have managed to prepare an equivalent agenda of meetings to the one they received from the Chamber. Nevertheless, it would have been so time consuming and costly that it would not have been worth. They state that the resources that would have been devoted to the preparation of the agenda if done on their own would have been so many that they would not have done it.

Especially all the firms recognise many of Internets disadvantages. First of all, the Internet gives you access to consulting profiles of firms and especially to forums where those firms are valued and ranked in their sectors. However, it is very hard to delimit the search especially when you are seeking for contacts in an unknown market.

Secondly, all of the firms highlight that they could have found the contact of firms online but that they would not have managed to arrange a meeting as the Chamber and their delegates did. This feeling is common to all the interviewees which think that the Internet gives you access to contact details and opinions on a firm but does no guarantee you to be heard.

Thirdly, the ensemble of firms think that the physical presence of Chambers' delegates in the country is of paramount importance in explaining the success of the service. Although further contact and management of invoices and commands can be made virtually, the first contact needs to be face to face for things to work more smoothly. As one of the interviewees stated, the mission, and therefore the physical visit to the market, marks a turning point in the internationalisation process of the firm.

Firms also value other aspects of the commercial missions that where not regarded in the hypothesis. They unanimously consider the format of grouped mission and the logistic support to be of great help.

On the one hand, the fact that an expert from the Chamber of Barcelona travels with the firms together with the fact that they advise which flight and hotel to take and give logistic support throughout the journey is regarded as very helpful. Interviewees highly appreciate the help on dealing with visas, hiring a chauffeur when abroad and translators when needed. The Chamber also puts at availability their travel agency for a less problematic organisation of the trip. This sensation of on-going support and logistic assistance is considered to be a distinctive characteristic. Many firms recognise that the experience of the Chamber is made obvious throughout the organisation of the mission and that it is of enormous help.

On the other hand, and most importantly, interviewees state that being accompanied by other firms in the grouped mission is much more enriching than travelling on your own, for it represents a form of both emotional and professional support. The number of firms attending to a mission can normally be from 5 to 12. All of the interviewees are delighted

with the company of the other participants and they recognise it makes the trip easier both at a personal and professional level.

At a personal level because there is emotional support in an unknown country, there is exchange of information during dinners in the hotel -which is the same for all participants- and many networking opportunities.

At the professional level, it is fruitful because most of the missions are plurisectorial and this leaves room to learn from others, for synergies to take place among participants as well as discover new business opportunities. As an example of how this can be a positive exchange, we have the case of one of the firms which, while exchanging ideas during a dinner, realised that one of the meetings that had not been interesting for them could be a profitable contact for another firm taking part in the mission. Also, among participants, new business opportunities were created, for instance logistics firms caught the attention of companies in need of export experts.

#### V.6.1. *Innovation networks*

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The information and feedback obtained through the study of these cases can be useful to further study the topic of Chambers role in the 2.0 society and can be object of use to improve international services of the Chamber of Barcelona.

According to users' innovation theory and the study of innovation and entrepreneurial networks in Europe (Fernández Pérez & Rose, 2010), collecting information from the consumer is a very important source of innovation ideas. In fact, what the consumer wants is a reflect of what is needed in the market<sup>34</sup>. Firms need to look into consumer feedback and analyse whether it is possible to develop modifications to improve the service or product offered. This is why, the case study carried out for this thesis can be of use to improve the quality of the bundle of services offered by the international department.

As interactions are an essential part of the development of innovations. It has been suggested that upstream and outward-looking innovative environments have helped transform successfully the products and services offered by many firms (Fernández Pérez & Rose, 2010).

Hence, it can be useful for the Chamber of commerce to use the characteristics stated in the hypothesis as a differential strength to promote their services, for it has been shown that the legal public entity status, the global network, the price and the intermediation for subsidies canalisation are regarded as key added values by target firms.

Moreover, using user feedback obtained through interviews, it can be useful to the Chamber to underline as a differential characteristic the logistic support offered throughout the whole process of the commercial mission as well as the positive fact that missions are grouped.

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<sup>34</sup> Fernández Pérez, P., & Rose, M. (2010). *Innovation and Entrepreneurial Networks in Europe*. New York: Routledge.

On the same line, this work suggests to the Chamber of Barcelona the development of a strategy to better take advantage of networking possibilities among participants in missions. As exchange of information among groups participating in missions is regarded as a very positive asset both personally and professionally, the Chamber should be aware of how this can be of use before, during and after missions. Thus, proposing both exchange of information between firms in a pre-mission environment and leisure activities during commercial missions where participants can naturally interact and easily take advantages of the group knowledge and experience.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

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Through the first chapters of this thesis, the **history** of Chambers has been analysed, thus learning that Chambers of Commerce were born from **protest** and **willingness to be heard by governments**.

Despite their generalised initial **lack of the resources**, with time, they became an **honourable** brand associated with the promotion of trade, the improvement of legislations on defence of the business interest and the **supply of information** to firms.

**Voicing business interests** was their initial goal. However, this was soon supplemented with coffee and **reading rooms**, commercial arbitration, advice, and information. Later, their bundle of services continued evolving as employment bureaux and commercial examiners. Then came export certifications and an increasingly relevant role of **business advisor** for internationalisation.

The turning point for Chambers was, however, becoming from the 1980s onwards a partner **of the government**, which meant increasing the bundle of services to apprenticeships and workforce training.

In particular, it has been analysed how the **Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona** (1886) suffered an endemic lack of monetary resources at the beginning but managed to grow as an entity of reference to businessmen and traders. Throughout history, it has campaigned to defend the business interest and to promote Catalan trade.

After more than two decades relying on the sole financing of voluntary membership fees, in 1911 a Decree stated that membership to Chambers in Spain would become compulsory, these receiving a narrow percentage of the corporate tax. From then onwards, the Catalan Chambers have belonged to the **continental model** of Chambers of Commerce, in which membership is compulsory for all firms in their geographical scope. As opposition, we talk about the **Anglo-Saxon model** where membership is voluntary.

A plot twist arrived with the removal, in 2011, of the **compulsory membership fee**; which represented the 70% of income and now accounts for the 30% of the financing of Chambers of Commerce in Catalonia and Spain.

This unforecastable change, sunk the economic resources of the Chamber of Barcelona, and added to the growing weight of the **Internet**, may put at threat the services of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, especially the international department.

In this work, it has been analysed how **crowdsourcing** in the **Web 2.0** – that is, the process whereby the power of many, often amateur and co-creators used to create free content



online- might be commonly used to undertake tasks that were once preserved to a few **specialists**, such as the Chamber.

Due to a lack of time and resources, this work focuses on the analysis of the **international department of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona**. To know how to better position the international services and to analyse whether the web 2.0 poses a threat to them, the **differential traits** of commercial missions were sought.

Through the study of **official writings, corporate promotional materials**, and the development of **five case studies**, it has been demonstrated that what the web 2.0 has to offer is **complementary** to the **commercial missions** undertaken by the international department of the Chamber of Barcelona.

The four hypotheses of this work have been supported. That is, it has been proven formally and empirically that firms hiring commercial missions to internationalise with the Chamber perceive as **key added values** of the institution: the **status** of public right entity, the built-in worldwide chamber **network**, the affordable **price** and the direct intermediation for the obtainment of **subsidies**.

The **status** of public right entity is key to project an image of **trust** and **neutrality**, as it represents the general business interest. Plus, firms would rather go to a *semi*-public entity since it is not exclusively guided by profit-making as it may happen with private consultancies.

The worldwide Chamber **network** and the existence of **interlocutors** that are physically at **destination** is a trait of paramount importance that determines the quality of the international services. The network is useful both at public and private level. It offers contact with the **homologous** entities in other countries -that is, other chambers of commerce- but also open doors to set up meetings with potential **clients** in the private sector that would otherwise be out of reach for firms at an individual level.

The concepts of **price** and direct channel for the obtainment of **subsidies** represent the same advantage for firms: **affordable internationalisation** services. For small firms and start-ups, normally without many financial resources, the price is a key characteristic. These firms do not tend to have an export department and rely on the externalised service the Chamber for a significant low price.

For larger and more experienced firms, that employ their own export managers, the service of commercial mission presents competitive prices that are both **time-saving** and **cost-advantageous**.

**Subsidies** are also an essential added-value for small firms, as they represent a significant help to finance a commercial mission. For larger firms, rather than the amount of the subsidy, what is important is the help and constant support with the **bureaucracy**. Direct channel for subsidy obtainment is highly valued but there are also some **criticisms** concerning the **lack of guarantees** for ensuring the assignation from public calls or bids and the length of **time** it takes to have them reimbursed, as small firms may lack of financial resistance to wait for payables to arrive to the due date.

Throughout the analysis of the case studies, other added values for the commercial missions have been highlighted unanimously by interviewees. These being: **on-going logistic support** and the fact that missions were **grouped**. The Chamber of Barcelona can use this information to better position their services.

Inspired by the case studies, this thesis suggest to the Chamber of Barcelona to develop of a strategy to take advantage of **networking possibilities** among participants in commercial missions. Exchange of information among groups participating in missions is regarded as positive both personally and professionally. The Chamber should be aware of how this can be of use before, during and after missions. Thus, proposing **exchange of information** between participants in a **pre-mission** environment and **leisure activities** during commercial missions where participants can **naturally interact** and easily take advantages of the group knowledge, experience, and create enriching **synergies**.

Although younger and born-global firms tend to rely on **Internet** as a source of foreign market **information**, the Web 2.0 seems a **complementary** tool to commercial missions. The role of the Chamber is justified as it has been shown through the 5 case studies that the internet puts at reach data but, as it is obvious, does not help the firm take action and set up a meeting.

Nowadays, **online presence** is necessary to spread the image of a brand and keep track of already-tied-up agreements. Nevertheless, in the internationalisation process, **physical visits** continue being the master key to develop fruitful and trustworthy business relationships internationally.

It can be stated that commercial missions by the Chamber take sense because they put at reach of all the firms actual **market experience** and **contacts**. Thus, helping firms avoid falling in the **virtuality gap** by misreading online information, something that would be detrimental to their own export activity.

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