

**INNOVATIVE BUSINESS MODELS WITHIN NICHE TOURIST MARKETS: SHARED
IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY AND FLEXIBLE NETWORKS.
THE CASE OF THREE ITALIAN SMES.**

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The evolution of business models is a crucial challenge for tourism companies, which should understand how they can stimulate their creativity and introduce innovation. However for many firms, in particular for SMEs, this process is not so easy to be adopted. Even more difficult is to understand how the business model should change to be successful in solving what appears to be one of the main problems for SMEs, especially within mature, tourist destinations, i.e. targeting new profitable segments.

The paper discusses the main findings of a research project carried out by the authors about changes in the business models of Italian tourism companies, underlining in particular three case-studies of interest in terms of the innovation put in place and that relate to SMEs. The analysis, based on the business model canvas, the value constellation and the storytelling, found out that these three firms are flexible companies that have characteristics emblematic of the knowledge and information economy business models. They successfully answer the needs of specific niches, finding new opportunities within a mature tourism market and famous destinations, thanks to their ability to develop wide flexible networks, where customers are an active part, and thanks to the value proposed to the clients centred on the idea of a shared identity between the clients and the company's founders and staff and of an authenticity guaranteed by the life story of the founders themselves.

1. INTRODUCTION: BMS EVOLUTION AND INNOVATION AND THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Business models, their evolution and innovation have generated great attention and discussion since the 1990s (Zott, Amit & Massa, 2011; Gordijn, Osterwalder, & Pigneur, 2005).

The academic interest was firstly linked to the e-business emergence (Pateli & Giaglis, 2003; Pateli & Giaglis, 2004), the advent of Internet-based firms (Mahadevan, 2000; Onetti et al., 2012) and the risk the new technological and digital environment implied for traditional business models (Viscio & Pasternack, 1996; Teece, 2009). Afterward, this interest widened to the analysis of any kind of business (Onetti et al., 2010), from very different disciplinary perspectives (Shafer, Smith & Linder, 2005).

As far as tourism, hospitality and travel studies are concerned, a somehow similar pattern can be detected, although the study of business model evolution is not as widespread as it is for other sectors.

Similarly to what happened at a general level, the attention on business models and business model innovation in the tourism industry is focused on the so called e-tourism (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015) as all the traditional tourism sectors (hospitality, airlines, tour operators, travel agents, etc.) and destinations themselves were completely re-engineered to incorporate and exploit the possibilities offered by ICT (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis & Zoge, 2007; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Jun, 2011). More recently, the spotlight has been put on how hospitality and travel businesses should be adapted or are adapting to accommodate the social media evolution (Sigala, 2009) and consumer co-creation (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Sigala, 2010; Sigala, 2011), and on the emergence of sharing economy centered tourism businesses (Mikhalkina & Cabantous, 2015).

Throughout all these studies, "big companies" cases such as Starbucks (Sigala, 2011), airlines (Buhalis, 2004), Thomas Cook or OTAs (Buhalis & Jun, 2011) are analysed or taken as examples of business model evolution or innovation.

Excluding some studies on small-medium hotels (Paraskevas & Buhalis, 2002; Buhalis & Delmezi, 2004), little attention has been so far dedicated to SMEs and to business models

where technology and Internet are surely a basic feature, but that are not technology or Internet-based.

This paper aims at being a contribution in this direction, analysing the cases of three young SMEs presenting interesting and innovative elements in their business models, but where technologies are not per se the central feature.

Furthermore, the paper aims at highlighting how these three firms have features typical of the knowledge and information economy business models, even if not born or specifically conceived by their founders as new economy businesses.

It will also show, on the other side, how the Internet and social media are essential in sustaining some of those firms' peculiar core features.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The choice of the case-studies

The three case-studies and the main findings discussed in this paper are only a part of a broader research project commissioned to Ciset and carried out by the authors about the evolution of Italian tourism industry and the main changes in the business models of tourism companies.

This project was based on interviews and focus groups with several players of the Italian tourism industry and on the analysis of ten case-studies – three of them presented in the paper –, which have been selected since they are representative of companies successful in innovating or creating ex-novo an innovative business model.

In particular the three case-studies discussed in the paper have been chosen according to the following four criteria:

- they are very small businesses, therefore being emblematic of business model innovation in SMEs;
- they work in very well-known and mature Italian tourism destinations, where innovation and differentiation of the tourism product is strategic for the competitiveness of the company;
- they are new companies, i.e. their business model is not an adaption of an existing one but it was conceived ex-novo as described below;
- they are not companies of the hospitality sector, which has already been studied in tourism literature;

These three case-studies are Italian firms specialised in responsible tourism and niche products, all created about ten years ago.

- Addio Pizzo Travel – a Sicilian tour operator offering ethical “mafia-free” travel experiences;
- Village4All – an Emilian based company managing the International Quality Brand *Hospitality for All*, specialised in accessible tourism;
- Anfibia.com – a Sardinian tourism service business specialised in promoting and organising cycling and active tourism experiences.

2.2. Tools and methodological approach for the analysis

The main objective in analysing the three cases – and the other firms included in the group – was understanding how they create value for the customers (Bowman & Amborsini, 2000; O’Cass & Ngo, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2006). All of these cases operate in well-known and mature destinations, where traditional market segments are reaching saturation and tourists are becoming more demanding (O’Cass & Sock, 2015), and in this context it was particularly interesting both for the study and the client that originally commissioned it, to understand how these businesses manage to differentiate, and if this differentiation was due mainly to a better service performance (Falk, Hammerschmidt & Schepers, 2015) and/or to personal relationships and interactions created with the tourists (Gronroos & Ravald, 2011).

In order to explore how value is created and what differentiates these businesses from others within the same competitive environment, the Osterwalder (2004) approach was preferred among the various perspectives proposed by the literature (Onetti, et al., 2012; Shafer, Smith, & Linden, 2005; Zott, Amit & Massa, 2011). This approach presents two main advantages:

- it focuses on the way the company creates value, it highlights as key elements customer segments and partnerships and it devotes attention to customer-firm relationships (Zott, Amit & Massa, 2011);

- its “translation” into the business model canvas makes it easier to discuss with the entrepreneurs about their own businesses, creating a common, quick to read and easy to understand and modify ground, and to get a deeper understanding of the business logic.

Furthermore, to better appreciate how and how much value is created thanks to a network including other firms and customers, the authors studied the value constellation of each of the three businesses.

The value constellation (Norman & Ramirez, 1993; Juettner & Wehrl, 1994) was preferred to other models – e.g. the value chain (Porter, 1985; Kaplinsky and Morris, 2001) – because the tourism business is such that the various services have reciprocally supporting or complementary roles (Van Riel *et al.*, 2004), and they are evaluated by the tourists as a whole (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). The tourists, then, assess the “value” of the single services from the point of view of the total travel experience (Van Riel *et al.*, 2013), thus making the “value chain” perspective too partial with respect to the value as perceived by the clients.

Value constellation in fact has been often applied to study service sector (Sundbo *et al.*, 2007), in tourism (Mattsson *et al.*, 2005), in value co-creation (Möller and Rajala, 2007) and in tourism experience setting (Sorensen, 2008). Furthermore, it encompasses, when needed, the role of the customer within the network (Sfandla & Bjork, 2013).

As for the business model canvas, the value constellation as well was built and discussed with the business owners.

To gain a deeper understanding and give context to the business model, the discussion on the canvas and the value constellation have been supported by storytelling techniques, such as video and audio interviews where the founders were asked to narrate their business, representing it and explaining the reasons why they created it. Storytelling was used both because it can be of support in expressing a business model (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) or a value network, that it is often partially “in the head” of the business owner, and because it seems to be particularly effective when dealing with entrepreneurs (George & Bock, 2011). The storytelling tool was particularly used to study how the business creator interprets the value they propose, where the value is created, and how much this value offer is then similar to the value perceived by the customers (O’Cass & Sock, 2015).

3. THE CASE-STUDIES

3.1. Addiopizzo Travel

3.1.1. Presentation of the case-study

Addiopizzo Travel is a tour operator, born in 2009 and based in Palermo (Sicily, Italy), which specialises in ethical tourism and in particular in “mafia-free” travels. Indeed it is inspired by the values and missions pursued by Addiopizzo, a movement and association of volunteers that are promoting a virtuous and mafia-free economy through the means of a critical consumption, by supporting producers and entrepreneurs that refuse to pay “pizzo”, i.e. the protection money, the “extorted tax” imposed by the mafia to local companies. Addiopizzo Travel applies the same idea for an ethical and critical consumption to the travel and tourism sector, by selecting for its tours and packages only suppliers who do not pay pizzo.

In particular Addiopizzo Travel bases its business on selling on one hand study tours, mainly addressed to young people and schoolchildren, and, on the other hand, travel packages and one-day excursions in Sicily (cultural tours, food and wine tours, bike tours, etc). In addition Addiopizzo Travel promotes a list of mafia-free accommodation on its website, also acting in some cases as an intermediary between the potential clients and the accommodation itself.

All suppliers are certificated by the Addiopizzo association through the logo “Certificato Addiopizzo”.

The staff of Addiopizzo Travel includes five partners - three of them are the founders -, with different backgrounds and studies (tourism economics, art, literature, communications, etc.) and other several collaborators (such as travel guides, etc.), who share the “pizzo-free” philosophy, being first of all part - and in some case founders - of the Addiopizzo association.

3.1.2. Main findings of the analysis

The business model canvas, the value constellation and the storytelling allows to underline the main aspects that strongly characterise Addiopizzo Travel’s business model and that contribute to the innovative character of the company.

Firstly, in regard to customer segments, Addiopizzo Travel targets a specific niche tourist segment, that does not simply draw on the general segment of responsible tourists but that addresses specifically those responsible and ethical tourists who strongly act in favour of legality and against mafia; for those consumers it is important not only to select operators (accommodation, restaurants, etc.) who do not pay “pizzo” (protection money) but also to visit itineraries and places as well as to meet people who have become a symbol for legality and freedom. In such a way, Addiopizzo Travel is able to work and to be competitive in a mature destination – Sicily – thanks to an innovative product targeted not to the “mass market” but specifically to a well-defined niche.

A second driver of innovation is the fact that the profile of clients perfectly match with that of Addiopizzo Travel’s founders, or better the founders and collaborators of the company are part of the same segment. Both Addiopizzo Travel’s staff and clients share the same values, attend the same physical and virtual “places” (such as conferences, events, social media, etc.), are volunteers or supporters of the Addiopizzo association and of other similar movements in their own town or country. The only exception are children and teenagers travelling with their school. In this case, however, it is the school itself that shares the value.

The “overlap” between staff (Addiopizzo Travel’s founders and collaborators) and clients leads to a peculiar relationship between the two parties, that is based on an “exchange”. On the one hand Addiopizzo Travel not only is a classic tour operator that sells travel packages, but it plays a consultant, cultural mediator and certifier role in favour of its clients, by making its expertise and experience available for them. Since they have in common the same passion and they are part of the same “community”, consumers trust Addiopizzo and rely on it for living a true “mafia-free” experience; the knowledge and personal life of Addiopizzo Travel’s founders and collaborators (for example many of them are volunteers in the Addiopizzo association) is the guarantee of the quality and authenticity of the service.

On the other hand the motivation and “life-style” that characterise Addiopizzo Travel’s clients lead them to be active customers and to be an active part in the company’s network, in particular for the development of the product itself. Clients can and want to give their opinion on the experience they have lived as well as to suggest places, itineraries or other attractions that they would like to visit in order to learn more about Sicily and the mafia-free movement. Addiopizzo Travel then takes advantage of all this feedbacks and suggestions in order to integrate and improve its products; Addiopizzo Travel’s offer is then flexible and open to changes that are brought by clients - as well as by other partners - and that can become a driver for innovation.

As fourth aspect, it is then evident that customers’ relationships play a strategic role. These relationships are developed not only during the visit on site but also in the pre- and ex-post experience in order to motivate clients and stimulate the “exchange” of feedbacks and suggestions. The relationships indirectly begin and continue in the physical and virtual places that both Addiopizzo Travel’s founders/collaborators and customers attend for cultivating their shared passions. Online channels, such as social media, blogs, newsletter and web-sites represent a key support for communications and customer relationships.

Finally, another aspect to be mentioned is Addiopizzo Travel’s network. It can be described as a flexible and open network, also built on informal relationships that are guaranteed, again, by the sharing of common values. For example the relationships with travel agencies are based not so much on traditional commercial contracts but on a common ethical vision. In addition to clients, key partners of this network are all those bodies and people that contribute to product quality and authenticity and to the dissemination of the “mafia-free” culture, i.e. the Comitato Addiopizzo association, the Italian Responsible Tourism Association, other associations and foundations, public institutions, schools and universities, tourist operators and producers, etc. The flexibility of the network is due not only to the entry of new partners but also to the role that every actor can play according to the specific situation: it is emblematic the case of schools and universities that can be both clients – when they buy study trips – and partners – when they cooperate in specific projects or activities.

Table 1 – Addiopizzo Travel’s Business Model Canvas

Key Partners -Suppliers -Public institutions -Responsible tourism associations -Universities / schools	Key Activities -Travel planning and development - Certification activities for suppliers	Value Propositions “Mafia-free” travels to Sicily, i.e. travels based on companies and operators who do not pay “pizzo” to mafia. -Study travels -Travel packages and one-day excursions	Customer relationships Pre: -Attendance of the same places attended by ethical tourists and in general by people who support the Mafia-free movement. -Social network, website, newsletter -Taylor-made reservation During -Guided visited Post: -Newsletter -Social network		Customer Segments -Schoolchildren -Tourists Responsible tourists and same-day visitors who act in favour of legality and against mafia.
	Key Resources -“Addio Pizzo” Certification -Guides		Channels Direct channel (swebsite)		
Cost Structure -Human resources (guides) -Promotion and communication			Revenue Streams - Travel packages (80%) - Excursions (15%) - Fee for certifying accommodation (5%)		

3.2. Village for All

3.2.1. Presentation of the case-study

Village for all – V4A is a company born in 2008 and based in Emilia Romagna (a northern region of Italy), specialised in accessible tourism and whose mission is to guarantee “a holiday for everybody”, by promoting accessible hospitality, social inclusion and the right to travel.

In particular Village for All manages the International Quality Brand *Hospitality for All*, that includes and promotes accommodation and tourist facilities that answer the specific needs of tourists with a reduced mobility or other particular requirements (allergies, sensory limitations, etc.). After a direct visit to every accommodation willing to be included in the network, Village for all suggests the improvement to be implemented, and, if the results is satisfactory, grants the quality brand, and ensures transparent, correct and precise information through a dedicated web-site (in five languages in addition to the Italian one). The information provided by V4A to the potential tourists is completely free and does not require any registration to customers.

The aim is not to deliver a simple certificate proving if the accommodation is or not accessible, but to give the potential clients all the necessary information for selecting for themselves the accommodation that better than others is consistent with their specific needs. Indeed, the idea of a Quality Brand conceived in such a way is due to the awareness that when we talk about accessible tourism or “Tourism for all”, the market is very diversified, since it includes customers with different disability, from motor disability to sensory limitations (blindness, deafness, etc.), from food allergies to specific diseases (diabetes, celiac disease, etc.).

The staff includes five people, all having years of experience with accessible tourism: two founders in management position and three other collaborators in charge of administration, marketing and ICT.

3.2.2. Main findings of the analysis

The business model canvas described in the image below shows the main components that characterise Village for All's business.

The first aspect to be mentioned is directly linked to the value proposition, which is based on the ability to bring together two different but interdependent groups of clients: on the one hand accommodations and tourist facilities and on the other hand tourists; both of them represent the customer segments of Village for All. The value is brought by the Quality Brand *Hospitality for All* and the related online platform, who enables the interaction, and by the specific advisory service that the company offers to both customers groups. While tourists are guided in evaluating and selecting the best facilities according to their own needs, tourism operators who are part of the network rely on a personalised counselling service; indeed Village for All offers to companies training activities and a detailed improvement plan with guidelines for improving the accessibility and better targeting this specific market. In addition, the companies that are awarded the brand benefit from the promotion and visibility ensured by the web-site.

Secondly, the existence of such a value proposition is based on the trust put by tourists and tourism providers in the competences and expertise of Village for All. In addition to the long and certified experience of the staff in accessible tourism management and in universal design, the main guarantee is represented by the physical condition of one of the founder: he is a reduced mobility person himself - due to an accident - who has decided to make the experience gained through his personal life available to other people with disability and to enterprises who want to improve their offer. No one knows the specific needs of this specific target group better than him. As already observed in the case-study of Addiopizzo Travel, the guarantee given by Village for All to its clients is based on a clear identification of the founder with the final customers, i.e. travellers with special needs.

A third element of innovation is the online platform and in particular the app "V4AInside", which is used by the staff for collecting and analysing the data and information about the accessibility of the tourism providers. The application, specifically developed by Village for All, automatically generates different sheets, according to the type of enterprise (hotels, other accommodation, restaurants, museums, etc.), and it collects a series of multimedia file (photos, videos, etc.) and physical attributes (slope of a floor, height, etc.).

As fourth aspect to be mentioned, the network built by Village for All is a strategic component of the business: partners are Italian and international associations and organisations active in the field of accessible tourism or in general in tourism (for example the UNWTO), trade associations, public bodies at local, regional and national level (for example, the Italian Tourism Minister). All these entities are key partners for developing cooperative projects related to the promotion/development of accessible tourism and in general for increasing the value and visibility of Village for All in the national and international market. Furthermore, V4A acts often as a consultant for one or more of these partners, that are therefore sometimes also clients. In addition key partners are software providers, who are strategic for the updating and maintenance of the online platform.

Table 2 – Village for All's Business Model Canvas

Key Partners	Key Activities	Value Propositions	Customer Relationships	Customer Segments
Public bodies at national, regional and local level (for the development of specific projects about accessible tourism)	Marketing and communication Contacts with new companies and collection of information Advisory activity	Tourist operators -Support in (re)positioning in the accessible tourism market -Training courses -Improvement plan -Visibility	-Contact staff -Social media -Newsletter -Reviews	Tourist operators interesting in accessible tourism Tourists from accessible tourism market
National and international institutions for patronage, sponsorship and membership (for example Italian Tourism Minister)	Key Resources Human Resources Know-How ICT (App V4All Inside)	Customers -Detailed, transparent and free information about accessible accommodation and tourist providers -Website in 5 languages	Channels -Contact staff -Website	
National and international organisations (UNWTO, ENAT, SKAL, etc.)				
Cost Structure - Human resources (guides) - Promotion and communication		Revenue Streams - Travel packages(80%) - Excursions15%) - Fee for certifying accommodation (5%)		

3.3. Anfibia Ecotours

3.3.1. Presentation of the case-study

Anfibia Ecotours is a tourism service business, born ten years ago and based in Sardinia, whose mission is to support the development and promotion of cycling and active tourism holidays and, furthermore, organising that kind of experiences.

In particular Anfibia Ecotours is a B2B service provider, which offers concrete services addressed to public bodies and operators, such as designing of cycling itineraries for public entities, developing travel packages for Italian and foreign tour operators, land mapping. In addition, in recent years, through the brand Sardinia Grand Tours, Anfibia Ecotours produces and sells its own travel packages to Sardinia to travel agencies and tour operators or directly to clients.

Thanks to its specialisation in a specific and well-defined niche market and to a targeted offer based on customer needs, Anfibia Ecotours has become a reference point in Sardinia and it is extending its business to other regions.

The decision to focus on cycling tourism is based on two reasons: firstly, cycling tourism requires greater assistance for the organisation of activities compared to other typologies of active tourism (such as trekking); secondly, since the cycling tourism market is more differentiated in terms of customer needs and spending power, it is possible to offer different products, including those with an higher added-value. In addition, focussing on a relatively niche market, as cycling tourism is, Anfibia Ecotours has the opportunity to be strongly competitive in Sardinia, a very mature destination regarding "traditional" products, i.e. sun and sea tourism.

The staff includes four people - the founder and other three partners - with varied knowledge and experiences (tourism economics and management, literature, geography and cartography). It is indeed this differentiation of competences and expertise that allows the company to offer its peculiar services and to create value for its clients.

3.3.2. Main findings of the analysis

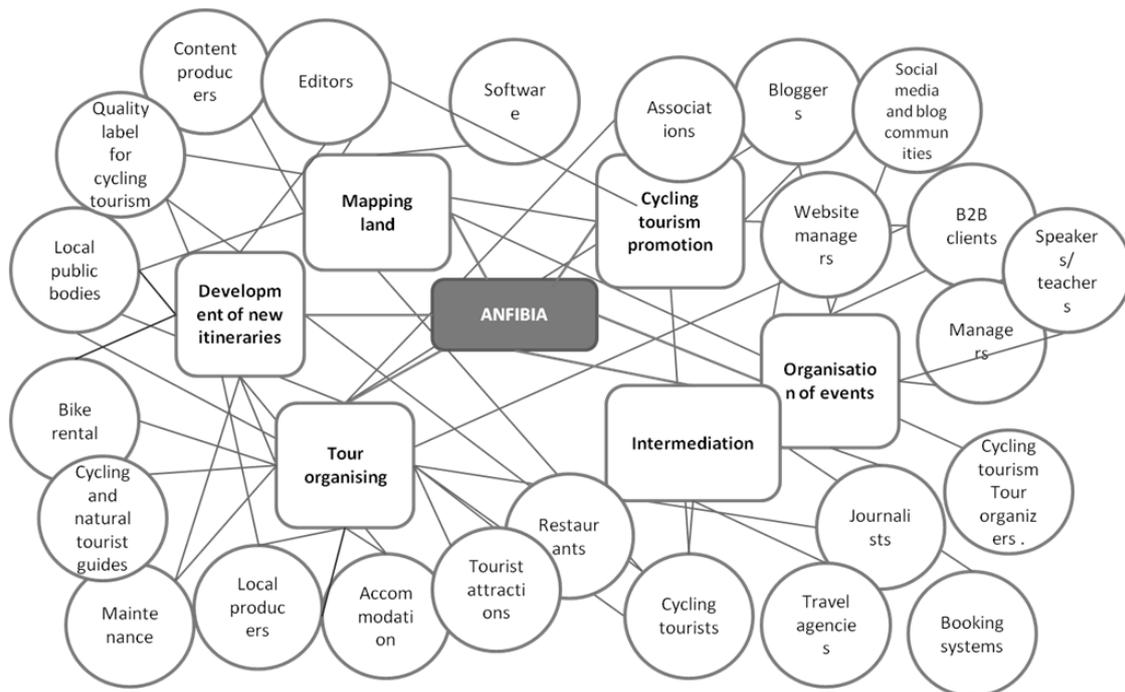
The first element highlighted by the business model canvas and that characterises the value proposition itself, is that the range of activities is very diversified, as well as the customer segments: from tour operators to local public bodies, from regional development agencies and consortia to authorities in charge of forest management and protection, from publishers of travel guides to companies specialised in navigation satellite systems (Anfibia Ecotours is Expert Partner Garmin for Sardinia).

This feature is reflected in the complexity of the relationships with customers and partners and in the structure of the value constellation. Anfibia Ecotours has developed a vast, open and flexible network of partners and collaborators, where these actors play different and interchangeable roles, according to the specific situation: they can be customers, but also partners or suppliers. For example Anfibia Ecotours cooperates with public bodies in projects funded by the EU for tourism and economic development; in such a situation, public bodies, who normally are Anfibia Ecotours' clients, become partners. Thinking about tour operators and travel agencies, they can be clients, when in need of Anfibia's expertise and support, or they can be partners for selling Anfibia's travel packages.

As a consequence the network is not defined *a priori* and it is not necessarily based on a formal structure; in such a way the network can change often and quickly.

Figure n. 3 clearly underlines the complexity of the network, where Anfibia is in the centre of a multitude of relationships, that allows it to obtain resources without meeting the cost necessary for internally producing these inputs. The network is a clear example of value constellation, which moves beyond the idea of a static supply-chain and where Anfibia acts as a catalyst for resources, expert and consultant and motivator for related projects.

Table 3 – Anfibia Ecotours' value constellation



Another important component and driver of innovation, that has already been identified in the previous case-studies, is the identification between Anfibia's staff and final clients, i.e. cycling (and active) tourists. They are part of the same "community", since Anfibia's founder, as well as the other members of the company, are first and foremost big sports fans, with a great passion for cycling and in general for active open-air experiences. Anfibia's founder is, among other things, mountain bike instructor recognised by the Italian Cycling Federation.

Without this shared passion, that has joined Anfibia's members around a common vision – the knowledge and competences of the staff (in tourism economics, business management, marketing, ICT, etc.) would not be enough to assure the success of the project. Indeed, thanks to this passion, Anfibia Ecotours perfectly knows what cycling and active tourists need and prefer, what the best communication channels are, which events and meeting "places" these

customers want to take part in, how this niche segment is evolving, etc. On the other side, this passion is a guarantee for customers and in general for all partners who cooperate with Anfibia and require its support.

Finally, it is precisely such a love for cycling and open-air activities, shared with a vast community, that stimulates creativity in developing new projects consistent with the market, and therefore Anfibia's innovation. The fact that Anfibia's staff take part in physical and virtual community of cycling fans (writing articles on blogs, participating in cycling events, exchanging experiences and posting comments on social media, etc.), allows Anfibia to take its cue from the suggestions, feedbacks and itineraries shared by other members of the community for developing and innovating its offer.

Table 4 – Anfibia Ecotours' Business Model Canvas

Key Partners	Key Activities	Value Propositions	Customer Relationships	Customer Segments
Public administrations	Public relations	-Design and development of cycling tourism itineraries for territorial bodies	-Social media and blog	-Local public bodies
Italian and foreign tour operators	Promotional activities	-Development of cycling and active tourism travels packages for Italian and foreign tour operators	-Website	-Regional development agencies
Community of cycling fans	Training	-Mapping land	-Through partnership linked to a common vision	-Consortia
Associations	Planning	Development and sale of its own cycling tourism travel packages , though the brand Sardinia Grand Tour		-Authorities in charge of forest management and protection
	Key Resources		Channels	
	Human Resources		- Direct channel	-Tour Operators
	Brand			-Travel guide publishers
	Network			Sardinia Grand Tour
				-Tour operators
				-Tourists
Cost Structure		Revenue Streams		
- Management and administration		- Revenue from public bodies (60%)		
		- Revenue from tour operators (40%)		

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the light of business model innovations that are characterising the tourism industry at European and international level, the paper has tried to give its contribution in particular to the discussion about new SMEs. Indeed, as literature analysis has underlined, much attention is paid to large companies such as international hotel chains, big online travel agencies, airlines, etc. On the contrary SMEs and the drivers that could generate innovation in their business model are less discussed. However, since in several countries – and in general in Europe – a great number of companies are SMEs, it is important to verify how they can innovate in order to remain competitive on the market.

The case-studies analysed in the paper are particularly suitable to explain how very small companies have been successful in developing innovative tourism products in very mature destinations. The innovation of their value offer is of course directly linked to the peculiarity and originality of their business models.

The case-studies taken into consideration may seem, at a first glance, more or less traditional tour operators – Addiopizzo Travel and Anfibia Ecotours - or certification brands – Village for All. On the contrary, an in-depth analysis highlights that these three tourism businesses sport features emblematic of the knowledge and information economy business models.

The main results can be summarised in the following elements that are common to all three case-studies.

The first one is represented by the value proposition and by customer relationships, which are centred on the idea of a mutual identification between the entrepreneur, his staff and the customers; they share the same values, passions and points of view and they attend the same places – both physical and virtual ones. This specific feature allows to identify them as “foyer” business models (Jansen, Steenbakkens, & Jägers, 2012), i.e. knowledge economy emerging business models based precisely on strong personal relationships between the customers and the people within the firm. The value offered by this kind of business is a shared identity. Within the range of “foyer” models, these three cases are closer to the furthest end, which includes businesses that offer to the customer “authenticity”, i.e. a connection to a value deeper than what the firm *per se* sells (Ibid.).

The passion, personal life and experience of the entrepreneurs/staff itself are the main guarantee of this “authenticity” and, therefore, of the “quality” of the product itself. The founders of Addio Pizzo Travel were among the founders of the Addiopizzo association, a group of citizens who openly challenged mafia. The founder of V4A has a first-hand experience of the “barriers” in tourist destinations, accommodation, transports and this is the feature that distinguishes V4A from other more “detached” certifiers. The founders of Anfibia have a lifetime as bike tourists, and are involved in promoting sustainable tourism in Sardinia since the end of the 1990s, when the concept itself was almost unknown in the Italian market. It can be said that the founders somehow vouch for the value proposition with their own life story and lifestyle. Web 2.0 is essential in enabling this kind of feature, as it allows everyone to somehow verify, and then certify that authenticity: in fact, communication and customer relationship for these businesses are based essentially on social media and storytelling, where the key themes are the values and the personal stories of the founders.

As a consequence, although in the sector of tourism intermediation, where logistics and service performance have been always the core value offer, these three business models do not focus their value proposition on it: the value they provide and that the clients perceive lies in their role as certifiers, consultants and relationships hubs both for their own suppliers and their clients.

The second aspect underlined by the analysis, directly linked to the previous one, is the role of clients, who are an active part of the very complex company’s value constellation and who contribute to the definition and innovation of the product. An example is Anfibia Ecotours, that designs and develops its cycling itineraries and its proposal for fostering slow tourism also by taking inspiration from the experiences that customers and, in general, cycling fans post and share on their blogs, social media, etc. This is, once more, a characteristic of the knowledge economy business models and, more in detail, of the so-called “innovator” business model (Ibid). Although the value offer of the three firms analysed is not focused on being a step ahead, as would be peculiar of the “innovator”, they include the tourists in their network and “exploit” them to develop product innovation.

Addio Pizzo, V4A, and Anfibia share another feature of the innovator business model, i.e. the ability to develop a wide and extremely flexible network around them, a network that includes a great variety of actors – other tourism operators, companies from other economic sectors, public bodies, associations, customers, volunteers, etc. – who can play different roles (customer, supplier, facilitator, innovator, etc.) according to the situation.

These companies are then flexible organisations, where the entrepreneurs and staff are sort of creative agents “mirroring” the customer and where priority is given to customer relationships and intelligence (although based more on relationships than on data collecting) instead of operations. All these features are, as shown, distinctive of emerging knowledge and information economy business models, although none of them are specifically technology or Internet-based businesses.

It might have been expected that knowledge economy was “spreading” in non-technology based tourism businesses but, so far, this phenomenon did not find much room in tourism studies. The analysis here presented aimed precisely at pointing out the characteristics of emerging SMEs business models within the travel industry. It should be further improved with other national and international case-studies in order to verify the consistency of this main findings with those coming from a wider analysis. However, these outputs are emblematic of the kind of drivers that can stimulate innovation and business model evolution for SMEs within the tourism business.

Furthermore, the same features identifying the three cases as knowledge economy business models, are allowing these SMEs to successfully answer the needs of specific niches, finding new opportunities within mature tourism market and well-known destinations, and therefore they can qualify as interesting cases not only to understand new business but also to innovate existing traditional SMEs in the tour operating business.

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