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Qualitative inquiry among female arts & crafts microentrepreneurs in Slovakia

O2: Capacity Gap Assessment

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Introduction, data and methods

In order to better understand the attitudes and experiences of female arts & crafts microentrepreneurs, and to analyse their perceptions of barriers related to internationalization, we have executed a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with five arts & crafts producers from small towns and villages closet o Bratislava. All interviewed producers were female, and all of them had at least two or three years' experience in arts & crafts micro-entrepreneurship. All of them sell their products on the home market, but some of them also managed to penetrate on the foreign markets.

As for the content of the semi-structured interview, it comprised of four main parts:

- Foundations of the business - questions in this part were focused on the business itself and on the entrepreneur. The aim was to get information on how the business was founded, how the entrepreneur started with it and if she is able to earn enough money for living.
- Customers - core of this part is to define customer group. We also wanted to know how an entrepreneur got her current customers and how she gets new ones. In this part we asked on the sales channels, which are very important on the market and they can have significant impact on the marketability.
- Foreign sales - at first, we wanted to know if the business had a foreign purchase orders, how many and from which countries. It is important for an entrepreneur to know how to handle them.
- How to act on the market - in this part we wanted to know some tips and tricks of the interviewed microentrepreneurs, based on their experience. We were also interested in perceived barriers to doing business in home or foreign country.



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Findings

At first, we wanted to know how the arts & crafts producers started with their businesses. In all cases, it was only a **hobby** at the beginning. Arts & crafts production is not only a sales-based business. Arts & crafts producers are artists who put **feelings and emotions** into their products. If the producer did not enjoy her work, her products would only be a series products that you can buy anywhere. Interviewed producers do their work on 100 %. It is their **hobby and also a full-time job**. They love their work and want to continue in it.

Second part of questions was focused on customers. Customers are very important for every business. If the business hasn't customers it will stop working well. This is true also in creative industry. Since we focused on the very specific sector in this industry, customer portfolio is very similar for every interviewed producer. But the process of **customer acquisition and retention** could be applied in every business area.

In the present day, **internet sales** are most common way among all of the sales. This way offers a number of advantages, e. g. simple **communication with customers** or the possibility to present all product portfolio. However, it is not enough to place a photo on the internet and wait, if they want to get customers. Most of the producers have a same opinion, that if you want to **promote the product properly**, you have to give a **lot of money and time** to this activity. If the product photos do not look good, it can discourage customer from purchase. The second important point is **personal contact** and personal **experience**. Personal contact with customer gives seller many options. She has an option to talk with customer and inform him/her about details he/she cannot find anywhere else. Sellers could get customers also by the way they act towards them. Sellers can give advice how to care about the product or where – on other places – to buy it. If the customer is satisfied with producer, process of buying and the product, he/she could tell about this personal experience and gets new customers. People believe in the product and the seller more if they see a real review or know about personal experience.

In the third part of questions we were interested in the **foreign sale**. Most of the interviewed producers sell their products abroad only to individuals. There are some reasons why it is so.

At first it is the existing barriers that we have focused on in the last part of questions. These barriers comprise mainly of **different laws** that producers have to adapt to. We can also say it is about a **strong competition**. Every day there is a new competition, not only on home market but also abroad. For the producer is more difficult to fight with competitors abroad, because it cost her a lot of time and money. **Fear of unknown** is another major barrier. It is about insufficient **courage**, about the fear of new things.

The second reason why producers do not go abroad is the **sufficient number of customers on the home market**. Some of interviewed producers declared the number of customers they have to be sufficient,



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as sometimes they even have not enough time to create desired number of products. This is very positive information, but the condition of sufficient number of customers may not be permanent.

If the sale to the foreign markets works on 100 %, there can be used **same sales channels** as on the home market. **Internet** is unlimited and the options it gives must be fully-used. There are many **portals**, through which producers can sell their products worldwide. For example: Etsy.com, Dawanda.com or our Slovak website – SASH.sk. It is important to make new contacts and keep contacts. Contacts are the way how to make new customers.

The last part of questions was intended to provide some **tips and tricks for arts & crafts** microentrepreneurs. It is essential for them to have courage and not to be afraid to **enter the market**. They cannot ignore right **training or preparation** and engaging into the different kind of events. For the arts & crafts producers the **fairs and markets**, where people try to enhance arts & crafts production, are very important. There are some **barriers** like **laws and legislation**, they should be aware of. The **competition** should not be underestimated, because it can be uncompromising. Last but not least, there is a barrier which is made by the producer himself/herself. It is about his/her **courage** and the **attitude** to the whole process.