

## **An Education in Commerce: Transmitting Business Information in Early Modern Europe**

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### **Introduction**

Merchants involved in long-distance trade in early modern Europe needed information of various types in order to be successful. Indeed, access to reliable information was essential for commercial success.<sup>1</sup> Merchants needed to know what kinds of goods were available in various commercial cities, what the local practices were, and they needed practical information on weights, measures, and currencies, and so forth. This kind of information is sometimes called *propositional knowledge*, meaning “what” is known about something.<sup>2</sup> There were several ways, both verbal and written, that merchants could obtain propositional information. For example, they could ask other merchants who had been in distant markets about conditions there; they could inquire of local merchants or officials once in a new city; they could affiliate with a merchant guild or trading company active in foreign parts; or they could read about conditions abroad before risking a trip abroad. Information was most useful before a merchant left for foreign parts.

Men of commerce also needed knowledge about how to make deals; write business letters, contracts, and credit instruments; keep their books; and how to comport themselves in the business world. This kind of “how to” information, or *prescriptive knowledge*,<sup>3</sup> presented either verbally or in writing, was probably best learned by direct experience during an apprenticeship or by working as a junior member of a firm.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass North, “Transaction Costs in History”, in *The Journal of European Economic History* 14 (1985), pp. 564-65.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena* (Princeton 2002), pp. 4-5; and Fritz Machlup, *Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution, and Economic Significance*, Vol 1 (Princeton 1980), pp. 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

A variety of institutions existed in early modern Europe that facilitated verbal contact between merchants within a network. The early modern Exchange, while it can be thought of as a market mechanism, was established as a place for merchants to come together to discover market information as well as a place to negotiate deals. While the first Exchange, the “Bourse,” emerged in the Flemish city of Bruges about 1409 (so named because it was located in the square in front of the house of the van de Beurze family), the idea of a distinct place for merchants to exchange information and transact business can be found in most European cities.<sup>4</sup>

Inns and taverns were other places where merchants could gather together to swap information. Taverns, in particular, were important in establishing a communications network for merchants.<sup>5</sup> This was true for foreign merchants new to a city who had to rely on inns and taverns for room and board, and also for merchants who had been in the city for a long time. Some taverns even catered to foreigners from specific locations helping to create communities of merchants, while innkeepers served to introduce foreign merchants to the commercial culture of the city.<sup>6</sup> By the eighteenth century, coffeehouses and clubs served many of the same kinds of functions that taverns had in previous centuries. Merchants involved in long-distance overseas trade were especially drawn to coffeehouses in London, where the coffeehouses provided merchants with a place to exchange market information and conduct business.<sup>7</sup>

While merchants employed all of these information gathering strategies during the early modern period, reading about foreign markets became increasingly possible because of the growth of the printing industry after about 1500. Certainly by the opening of the seventeenth century a profusion of merchant handbooks and manuals (both circulated manuscripts and published volumes) became available to provide both experienced and novice merchants with information on market conditions. Manuals and

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<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Harreld, “Trading Places: the Public and Private Spaces of Merchants in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp”, in *Journal of Urban History* 29 (2003), p. 662.

<sup>5</sup> Beat Kumin, “Useful to Have, but Difficult to Govern. Inns and Taverns in Early Modern Bern and Vaud”, in *Journal of Early Modern History* 3 (1999), p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> James Murray, “Of Nodes and Networks: Bruges and the Infrastructure of Trade in the Fourteenth-Century”, in Peter Stabel, Bruno Blondé and Anke Greve (eds.), *International Trade in the Low Countries (14th-16th Centuries)* (Leuven 2000), pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Alison G. Olson, “The Virginia Merchants of London: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Interest-Group Politics”, in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983), p. 367.

handbooks geared toward merchants had the advantage of being able to present both propositional and prescriptive knowledge to their readers without the necessity of direct contact with an informant.

Wolfgang Kaiser has estimated that between about 1470 and 1700 European publishers produced roughly 3,200 books and supplements for the use of merchants.<sup>8</sup> The same period that produced such an abundance of merchant manuals also witnessed some significant changes in the ways merchants involved in international trade organized themselves. Merchant organizations in early modern Europe fell into two rough categories: hierarchical and network forms of organization. The hierarchical form of organization is usually associated with the firm, while network forms of organization included guilds, trading nations, and consortia, as well as less formal “communities” of alien merchants.<sup>9</sup> Each organizational form had different ways to transmit information to its constituents. Information flowed up and down the hierarchy within the firm, sometimes yielding a rather inflexible and rigid form of communication. Networks, however, based information exchange on interpersonal relationships that recognized the importance of reciprocity and interdependence in information flows. But each of these organizational forms — hierarchy and network — made use of similar media to transmit and exchange information.

This essay will look at the development of merchant manuals from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries by examining the kinds of commercial information they provided to their readers and the change in their content over time; determining the audience the manuals’ authors had in mind and how authors’ and publishers’ ideas about audience may have changed; and by comparing the delivery of information through manuals with other strategies for transmitting information.

## **Transmitting Business Information**

The firm unquestionably constituted the basis of commercial activity in early

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<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Kaiser, “Ars Mercatoria — Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer analytischen Bibliographie und Datenbank”, in J. Hooek, P. Jeannin, and W. Kaiser, (eds.), *Ars Mercatoria: Handbücher und Traktate für den Gebrauch des Kaufmanns, 1470-1820*, vol. 3 (Paderborn 1991), pp. 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> M. E. Bratchel, “Alien merchant colonies in sixteenth-century England: community organisation and social mores”, in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 14 (1984), pp. 39-62.

modern Europe, but the merchant guild (or merchant 'nation'), an institution with deep historical roots, continued to provide long-distance merchants and merchant firms with protections and privileges in foreign commercial centers. The importance of the guild decreased during the early modern period as the primacy of the firm solidified. By the end of the sixteenth century, and certainly by the seventeenth century, the development of joint-stock companies provided merchants with new opportunities and new challenges as they sought information about trade from all parts of the world. Each of these organizational forms (network and hierarchy) provided merchants with benefits as well as posed problems in obtaining information.

The success of an early modern merchant firm depended on the ability of its principals to communicate with subordinates (agents, factors, servants, and service providers). Firms often employed couriers to carry news and instructions back and forth between the home office and branch offices. The Fugger firm of Augsburg had an extensive network of couriers to keep communication open between its various offices in order to transmit information on market conditions, local events, and news about competitors.<sup>10</sup> But courier services were not always reliable. In 1581, for instance, the Fugger courier was robbed outside of Cologne on his way from Antwerp to Nuremberg. The thieves destroyed the letters the courier was carrying, and the firm was never able to determine the fate of the courier.<sup>11</sup>

A firm's need for up-to-date information about markets and products was a perennial concern. Agents of the various India companies were faced with the problem of communicating over great distances. During the seventeenth century, the *Heeren XVII* of the Dutch East India Company published 'General Instructions' to guide the company's agents abroad in anticipation of slow communication lines.<sup>12</sup> Company ships carried a stream of letters and reports between Indonesia and Amsterdam to keep directors and agents informed, but because of the time it took for ships to travel back and forth between Europe and Asia information was rarely up to date. As late as the mid-eighteenth century British and American merchants crisscrossed the Atlantic intent on learning about

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<sup>10</sup> Victor von Klarwill (ed.), *The Fugger News-Letters* (New York 1926), pp. 11, 13, 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (London 1965), pp. 104-5.

products, manufacturing processes, markets, prices, and other commercial facts.<sup>13</sup>

Merchants who made these trips kept copious notes to insure their reports would be accurate.

While the literacy of merchants may have been uneven along status and prestige lines (from peddler to the international wholesaling elite, for example),<sup>14</sup> few merchants could have functioned in business with inadequate reading and writing skills. Indeed, the most important factor in the growth of commerce by the end of the Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period was higher levels of merchant literacy.<sup>15</sup>

Information exchange within the firm was necessarily a confidential enterprise, and from a very early date firms closely guarded the notes and reports of their agents. In addition to newsletters and other correspondence, firms used these notes and reports to compile commercial handbooks as a way to transmit procedures and commercial practices within the organization.<sup>16</sup> Very large joint-stock companies, like the East India Companies relied most heavily on their individual functionaries abroad to provide market information (as Carlos and Hejeebu point out elsewhere in this volume). Robert Stevens, for example, was an English merchant in Bombay whose twenty-some years in India gave him the experience necessary to produce a manual for merchants involved in the India trade. According to Stevens “nothing but a life, spent in those branches of commerce, can bring a man thoroughly acquainted with” foreign trade.<sup>17</sup> Merchants involved in global trade also made use of treatises produced under the direction of the East-India Company, such as Sir James Steuart’s *Principles of money applied to the present state of the coin of Bengal* (London, 1772).

Network organizations offered merchants more flexibility than hierarchical organizations; the information that networks provided was often (but not always) both

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Morgan, “Business Networks in the British Export Trade to North America, 1750-1800”, in John McCusker and Kenneth Morgan (eds.), *The Early Modern Atlantic World* (Cambridge 2000), pp. 41-46.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel A. Rabuzzi, “Eighteenth-Century Commercial Mentalities as Reflected and Projected in Business Handbooks”, in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1995), p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Kathryn Reyerson, “Reflections on the Infrastructure of Medieval Trade”, in Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron (eds.), *Trading Cultures: the Worlds of Western Merchants* (Turnhout 2001), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust, and Networks: Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy* (Lund 1998), pp. 226-27.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Stevens, *The New and Complete Guide to the East-India Trade* (London 1775), p. A2.

“thicker” and “freer.” But even while information obtained through network informants could be fuller than that provided in hierarchies, the methods of exchanging information in networks were more cumbersome, often requiring face-to-face contact.<sup>18</sup> Merchants recognized the benefits of interpersonal communication particularly for those foreigners new to a marketplace. Finding a merchant from one’s own country to associate with, either as part of a legally organized merchant guild or as an informal acquaintance, provided a newcomer with information about locating buyers, currency exchange, and dealing with local governments.<sup>19</sup> While merchant networks remained important for social and political reasons during the early modern period, merchant manuals served to provide the kinds of information that network contacts once did.

## Merchant Manuals

Many merchant manuals began as the private information compiled by a merchant for his own use, the use of his apprentices or his agents, or the agents of a firm. In this respect early modern merchant manuals continued in the tradition of their medieval precursors. Pegolotti’s famous merchant manual dating to the fourteenth century is one of the most well-known examples of a manual produced for use by agents of a large firm. Pegolotti may have meant for his manual to be used by the apprentices of the Bardi firm of Florence, but its title page indicates that merchants from all over the world who were involved in long-distance trade would find the information it contained useful.<sup>20</sup>

The Antwerp merchant Willem van de Lare, who spent several years in Lisbon, wrote his little handbook, *Regula Transporti*, probably in the late 1520s.<sup>21</sup> His book was never published and although the introduction is rather vague regarding the intended audience, it was certainly meant to act as an aid to young merchants learning to calculate the exchanges involved in long-distance trade.<sup>22</sup> Firms often developed private

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<sup>18</sup> Walter W. Powell, “Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization”, in *Research in Organizational Behavior* 12 (1990), p. 302.

<sup>19</sup> John Browne, *The Marchant’s Avizo* (London 1616. First published in 1589), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> “...cose bisognevoli di sapere a mercatanti di diverse parti del mondo...” Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, Allen Evans (ed.) (Cambridge 1936), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Willem van de Lare, *Regula Transporti* (unpublished manuscript) Plantin-Moretus Museum Archives, PM 318.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, “Ise een reghel daer men met vinden ende calculeren mach/ van alderhanden coopmanscapen/

handbooks to educate practitioners and these usually remained unpublished. Firms created instruction books of this kind to train children and apprentices, but few of them were intended for a public audience. While Italian firms produced most of the earliest merchant manuals,<sup>23</sup> they were known throughout Europe. Many of these commercial instruction books were ultimately published. The well-known *Handel Buch* by Lorenz Meder (Nuremberg, 1558) is one example of a published instruction book geared toward Germans, and specifically Nuremberg merchants.<sup>24</sup> Large firms continued to produce these unpublished merchant manuals for their young merchants well into the seventeenth century. The Antwerp firm of Van Colen-de Groote produced a handbook for its merchants as late as 1643;<sup>25</sup> it was probably based on earlier manuals.<sup>26</sup>

Authors who had a wider audience in mind either wrote their manuals with an eye toward publication, or their friends and acquaintances convinced them that their work should be published. Writing in the late sixteenth century, John Browne, a merchant of Bristol, indicated that his manual, entitled *The Marchant's Avizo*, was originally intended as a "private instruction for mee and mine."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, John Browne's son (also named John Browne) served as a merchant's apprentice sometime between 1575 and 1582, so it is quite possible that Browne wrote this manual as a private instruction for his son.<sup>28</sup> He wrote that some of his friends persuaded him to make his manual public. He consented because of "necessity and duty" to his fellow English merchants. Lewis Roberts, an English East India Company merchant, began writing his manual around 1618 for "the furtherance and helpe of mine own employment beyond the seas, at the charges of that worthy merchant" Thomas Harvey.<sup>29</sup> Roberts took twenty years to finish his book

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diemen transportert van eenen landt in een ander."

<sup>23</sup> Dahl (1998), pp. 226-8.

<sup>24</sup> Lorenz Meder, *Handel Buch* (Nuremberg 1558). See also the modern transcription edited by Hermann Kellenbenz, *Handelsbräuche des 16. Jahrhunderts. Das Meder'sche Handelsbuch und die Welser'schen Nachträge* (Wiesbaden 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Jean Denucé, *Koopmansleerboeken van de 16e en 17e eeuwen in handschrift* (Antwerp 1941), p. 15. The text of the manual is included in Denucé's book.

<sup>26</sup> Denucé listed a number of unpublished merchant manuals housed in the Antwerp Municipal Archives. See *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> Browne (1616), p. A2.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick McGrath (ed.), *The marchant's avizo, by I(ohn) B(rowne), marchant, 1589* (Boston 1957), pp. ix, xvi.

<sup>29</sup> Lewes Roberts, *The Marchant's Mapp of Commerce* (London 1638), introduction.

because of more pressing concerns, but Harvey's heirs seem to have been instrumental in getting the manual published. Jacques Savary, sometime merchant and French royal official, wrote his manual (published in 1675) also at the urging of others.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, by the seventeenth century Savary's manual was the quintessential merchant manual against which all others were measured.<sup>31</sup>

Whether for the private consumption of merchants within firms, or with an eye toward distribution to a wider audience, merchants used manuals as a means to educate aspiring merchants and to inform more experienced merchants. Merchants used manuals to share information by compiling and publishing items in their area of expertise.

### Types and Forms of Merchant Manuals

Merchant manuals can be categorized roughly into two groups: those that present information about trade (propositional knowledge), and those that provide assistance in acquiring knowledge needed to conduct trade (prescriptive knowledge).<sup>32</sup> Regardless of the category we might assign a particular author's work, we can find a variety of subjects in merchant manuals as authors rarely presented only one kind of information in a manual preferring to mix items of propositional and prescriptive knowledge. The table below shows the number of manuals produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries listed by general category. Most early manuals contained information on weights and measures, and currency exchanges arranged by region. Early merchant manuals in particular focused almost exclusively on this kind of information, and throughout the early modern period, this kind of manual predominated.

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Savary, *Oeuvres de M. Jacques Savary, Vol. 1 Le Parfait Négociant* (Paris 1757). This edition appeared roughly 75 years after the first edition, but it includes a statement about why he wrote his manual, and a short history of Savary's life not found in the earlier editions.

<sup>31</sup> Jochen Hoock, "Le phénomène Savary et l'innovation en matière commerciale en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles", in Jean-Pierre Kintz (ed.), *Innovations et renouveaux techniques de l'antiquité à nos jours, Actes du Colloque international de Mulhouse* (Strasbourg 1987), pp. 113-123.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur H. Cole, *The Historical Development of Economic and Business Literature* (Boston 1957), p. 9.

Number of Merchant Manuals Produced between 1500-1700 Grouped by Contents				
	1500-1549	1550-1599	1600-1649*	1650-1699*
<i>Knowledge Manuals (How to)</i>				
Arithmetic and Accountancy	207	409	209	522
Techniques and Practices	12	119	93	262
Vocational Training	0	5	3	11
<i>Information Manuals (What is known)</i>				
Weights, Measures, Exchange, etc.	217	539	310	767
Geography, Trade Routes, etc.	6	41	37	170
Law, Ethics, etc.	16	80	52	159

Source: Jochen Hoock and Pierre Jeannin, *Ars Mercatoria: Handbücher und Traktate für den Gebrauch des Kaufmans, 1470-1820*. Vols. 1 and 2 (Paderborn 1991-1993).

\* Susequent editions of books first published in the sixteenth century are not included in these figures.

Authors most commonly geared their books toward fellow merchants from their native town, Genoa or Venice for example. *Agiustamento universale di pesi, e Misure de panni di Lana, Seta, Lino & Vittouaglie*, by Finetto Oberti (Turin 1643), presents the weights, measures and currencies from the perspective of Genoa. *Le Grand Banquier ou le Livre des Monnoyes Etrangères réduites en monnoyes de France* (Paris, 1677), one of several manuals that the mathematician François Barrême wrote, deals with currency exchange from the French perspective. Jacques André Bottier's *Pratique du commerce* (Turin, 1773) takes a much more global perspective because it discusses weights, measures, and currency exchange not only within Europe, but also with several Asian, African and American commercial centers.

Books that simply gave the merchant information about weights and measures or stated exchange rates, while useful as reference tools, did not necessarily help merchants become proficient at their craft, and the data they presented was often dated. Manuals that showed merchants how to actually calculate currency and measurement exchanges were much more useful, particularly to the young merchant. Manuals on accountancy nearly doubled in number from the end of the fifteenth century through the sixteenth century, as the concept of double entry bookkeeping spread out from Italy.<sup>33</sup> Most of these kinds of manuals were based on Luca Pacioli's *Summa de Arithmetica* (Venice, 1494).

<sup>33</sup> Cosmo Gordon, "The First English Books on Book-Keeping", in A. C. Littleton and B. S. Yamey (eds.),

Not surprisingly some of the first manuals on arithmetic for merchants available in Northern Europe were published in Antwerp, Europe's sixteenth-century commercial hub. The anonymous *Die maniere om te leeren cyfferen* was first published in Brussels in 1508, but subsequent editions, in both Dutch and French (*La manière pour apprendre à cyfrer et compter*) were published in Antwerp between 1510 and 1569.<sup>34</sup> A variety of accounting manuals were published in German in the Empire's most important commercial centers: Augsburg, Frankfurt, and Nuremberg. The number of manuals published on arithmetic and accounting remained steady during the seventeenth century (see table). In 1601, the Bruges schoolmaster, Cornelis Pieterz published his *Het Fondament van Arithmetica* in Antwerp. Based on the inclusion of examples from commerce, his book must have been directed toward merchants. Richard Witt also included examples drawn from the experiences of merchants in his *Arithmetical Questions* (London, 1613).

Early modern merchants also made use of little dictionaries of commerce. These included definitions of commercial terms, identified towns and products, and often listed currencies and weights and measures. The production of these books increased during the second half of the seventeenth century making them quite common in the eighteenth century. Merchants had a large number of these commercial dictionaries to choose from: Honoré Lacombe de Prezel's *Dictionnaire du citoyen, ou Abrégé historique, théorique et pratique du commerce* (Paris, 1761), the *Manuel historique, géographique et politique des négocians* (Lyons, 1762) probably written by Jean Paganucci, or the anonymously written *Dictionnaire portatif du commerce* (Paris, 1777). In some cases manual authors added dictionary sections to more extensive manuals. Gottfried Christian Bohns's *Neueröffnetes Waarenlager* (Hamburg, 1763) was a dictionary that discussed the characteristics of commodities. His earlier book, *Gottfried Christian Bohns wohlerfahrener Kaufman, oder umständliche Nachricht* (Hamburg, 1762), provided information about Europe's principal commercial cities as well as instruction in contracts and commercial techniques, but this massive book also ended with an extensive commercial dictionary.

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Studies in the History of Accounting, (Homewood, IL 1956), pp. 202-3.

<sup>34</sup> Jochen Hoock and Pierre Jeannin, *Ars Mercatoria: Handbücher und Traktate für den Gebrauch des*

Not all of the manuals that provided information on commercial cities were in the form of dictionaries. *Dannemarks Handels Spiel* (Sorøe, 1766), edited by Hans Holk, gave information on places and also the names of prominent merchants involved in the trade of each town. Jurgen Elert Kruse's two volume *Allgemeiner und besonders hamburgischer contorist* (Berlin, 1762)<sup>35</sup> included one volume that provided information on important commercial cities, including the predictable discussions of currencies, weights, and measures for each city. In a departure from most other manuals about commercial cities, *The Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* (London, 1721), by a certain "N.H.," provided English merchants with a variety of helpful tips on trade within England. The author gave the reader some general advice, but also provided rate tables for transport between commercial cities, distances between English towns, and when and from where wagons and coaches arrived in London. Many of these commercial geographies were meant to be put in a pocket. The anonymously written, *Almanach du Commerce et des Voyages* (Paris, 1774) measured only 10 by 6 centimeters.

Reflecting the mercantilist policies of seventeenth-century states, manuals published during the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries focused on tolls and tariffs rather than currency and measurement conversions. This was particularly true for English authors who wrote guides to help merchants make sense of the kingdom's many regulations. *A Guide to the Customers and Collectors Clerks: or a new index to the Book of Rates* (London, 1699) by Richard Score, was a guide to *The Act of Tonnage and Poundage and Book of Rates with Several Statutes at Large in relation to Customs* (London, 1689). Another example of this kind of book is Thomas Langham's *The Neat Duties (all discounts and abatements deducted) of all Merchandize specified in the Book of Rates* (London, 1717) which includes a list of items that were prohibited to be imported into England. Of course manuals discussing tolls and tariffs were not completely new to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the early sixteenth century (and perhaps even earlier) manuals directed toward long-distance merchants from a particular place outlined the various tariffs and tolls that they might expect to encounter

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Kaufmanns, 1470-1820, Vol. 1 (Paderborn 1991), pp. 299-300.

<sup>35</sup> The first edition of Kruse's manual, which I did not have access to, was published in 1753.

while abroad.<sup>36</sup> New in the seventeenth century were manuals instructing local merchants about their own country's commercial regulations.

The various works of Jacques Savary are the most illustrative of those dealing with commercial regulations in French. He wrote several treatises on French commercial law, but his most famous merchant manual was *Le Parfait Négociant*, first published in 1675 followed by a dual language edition in both French and German published in Geneva in 1676. In all, over thirty editions of the book were published (including editions in Dutch, English, and Italian) between 1676 and 1800.<sup>37</sup> While Savary offered a variety of other topics, French mercantilist policy figured prominently in this manual dedicated to Colbert. During the years leading up to *Le Parfait Négociant*'s publication, Savary was in government service charged with revising commercial laws,<sup>38</sup> but at the urging of his friends he agreed to write this manual. *Le Parfait Négociant* became the standard merchant manual in early modern France, going through several editions after Savary's death in 1690.<sup>39</sup> Jacques Savary's son, Jacques Savary de Bruslons, was also involved in government service as Inspector General of the Customs House in Paris. Savary de Bruslons wrote the *Dictionnaire universel de commerce*, which was published posthumously by his brother Louis-Philémon Savary in 1723.<sup>40</sup>

Reflecting the increasingly world-wide reach of European merchants by the turn of the eighteenth century, many merchant manuals focused on the commerce of just one location, or on selected locations around the world. *Le Guide d'Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1701) written more on the order of a travel guide, included an extensive table of entry and exit tariffs on a large number of goods. A better manual directed to merchants wanting to trade in Amsterdam and to participate in the Dutch world-wide trade was Jacques le Moine de l'Espine's *De Koophandel van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1694). It also came out in a French edition the same year that it was released in Dutch (*Le Negoce*

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, the sixteenth-century merchant manual by Alessandro Moresini, *Tariffa del pagamento di tutti dacia di Venetia* (Venice 1525).

<sup>37</sup> Hooek and Jeannin, Vol. 2 (1993), p. 497.

<sup>38</sup> Preface to the seventh French language edition of Jacques Savary, *Le Parfait Négociant* (Paris 1713).

<sup>39</sup> Henri Hauser, "Le Parfait Négociant de Jacques Savary", in *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale* 13 (1925), pp. 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> Georges Goyau, "Savary", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIII (New York 1912), p. 489.

*d'Amsterdam*).<sup>41</sup> This manual included an extended discussion of commercial practices in Amsterdam, but also of Dutch trading partners around the world. Although le Moine de l'Espine had been a citizen of Amsterdam since 1679, his status as an immigrant ensured that he would not overlook the concerns of foreigners.

Many manuals of this type were concerned with the trade of more than one place in the world. S. Thomas's *The British Negociator* (London, 1765) was composed with the express intention of rendering "the business of exchanging easy and intelligible to young Merchant-Adventurers, factors and agents." This manual is filled with tables and rules of exchange for trade with Asia, Africa and the West Indies, although fully half of the book focuses on England's trade with the Netherlands.<sup>42</sup> Bottier's *Pratique du Commerce* (mentioned above) focused on Europe, but included the most important commercial centers in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. One of the more interesting manuals, however, that attempted to deal with world-wide trade, however, was the *Guide du Commerce* (Paris, 1764) by C.F. Gaignat de l'Aulnais. This manual likely began life as a textbook. The author was a merchant of Nantes who went on to teach at the Grand École du Commerce à Paris. This manual dealt with the commerce of China, Peru and the Americas, and especially the traffic in black African slaves along the Guinea Coast. What makes this manual unique is the great detail Gaignat included about how to manage trade. Like other manuals meant to instruct, he included examples of commercial instruments, but he also included useful information on managing cargoes and detailed examples of the specific records slave traders needed.

From the examples just presented, it seems that authors cast their nets fairly widely in order to reach as large an audience as possible for their manuals. Nevertheless, authors usually geared their manuals toward certain groups, or wrote them to help merchants solve a specific problem. One topic that received a fair amount of attention from some authors was the education of merchant apprentices.

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<sup>41</sup> Lucas Jansen, "De Koophandel van Amsterdam": Een Critische Studie over het Koopmans-Handboek van Jacques le Moine de l'Espine en Isaac le Long (Amsterdam 1946), p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> For a fuller discussion of the close connection between English and Dutch trade, despite the intense rivalry between the two, see David Ormrod, *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770* (Cambridge 2003), p. 337.

### Educating Young Merchants

While the usual way to educate the young who aspired to be merchants was to have them serve as apprentices or clerks for a number of years, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries some enterprising merchants published manuals meant to instruct novice merchants. But what these aspiring merchants should learn was not always clear. The Antwerp-born economist and author of *Consuetudo, vel, Lex Mercatoria, or The Ancient Law Merchant* (London, 1622), Gerard de Malynes, seems to have promoted a fairly broad education for young merchants.<sup>43</sup> For de Malynes, in addition to topics usually associated with commerce (accounting/bookkeeping, exchange, commodities, and commercial law), the young merchant needed to know Mathematics, Geometry, and Cosmography. In his *Essay on the Proper Method for Forming the Man of Business* (London, 1716), Thomas Watts added writing and modern languages to the list.<sup>44</sup> But neither of these books were necessarily intended to be used in instruction.

Savary's *Le Parfait Négociant* and Browne's *The Marchant's Avizo* are two excellent examples of a genre of merchant manual written expressly for the instruction of young merchants. While earlier manuals aimed at apprentice merchants were probably meant for the use of just one firm or group, Savary and Browne intended that their manuals should have a much wider appeal. Savary, for example, indicated that his manual would be an "ouvrage plus agreable, & entrer plus aisement dans l'esprit & dans la memoire des jeunes gens qui voudront s'instruire & embrasser la profession mercantille."<sup>45</sup> Browne expected his work would be useful to virtually any merchant, but he also hoped that his manual "might bee some stay to yong and weake wits."<sup>46</sup>

In *Le Parfait Négociant*, Savary provided counsel to parents who were considering commerce as a career for their children. Above all, he urged parents not force children into commerce; rather, parents should look for certain qualities in children that would indicate if they might be suitable for the profession. The two most important

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<sup>43</sup> Andrea Finkelstein, "Gerard de Malynes and Edward Misselden: The Learned Library of the Seventeenth-Century Merchant", in *Book History* 3 (2000), p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Watts, *An Essay on the Proper Method for Forming the Man of Business*, 1716, with introduction by Arthur H. Cole (Boston 1946), p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Savary, *Le Parfait Négociant*, 2nd edition (Geneva 1676), p. 2.

qualities parents should look for were inquisitiveness and a strong constitution. Once identified as potential merchants, Savary suggested that children begin their training by about age seven or eight, first learning writing, arithmetic, accounting, and languages. Aspiring merchants were also urged to begin reading histories, and trade/travel literature so that they might become knowledgeable about the customs and traditions of distant places and peoples. For Savary, the other “sciences,” while not completely useless to the merchant, were much less important. Indeed, he counseled parents to avoid the temptation to send budding merchants to colleges to learn Latin, philosophy, and rhetoric with higher status children, because it would come to no good. High status children too often mocked those destined for commerce so the college environment was not one conducive to producing good merchants.

Savary continued his discussion of preparing children for a life of commerce by pointing out that by age fifteen, children who had been educated according to his suggestions, were ready to choose which “corps de commerce” they preferred. Children, he said, should be apprenticed to several different types of merchants so they might make an informed decision about which branch of commerce to take up. The period of apprenticeship was very important for Savary. While he recognized that children of merchants were usually admitted automatically into the commercial guild of their parents, he felt that they must still serve as apprentices and must have reached the age of 18 before being admitted to the franchise.

In *Le Parfait Négociant*, Savary presented not only what the apprentice merchant should learn, but how he should comfort himself in his master’s establishment. Most importantly, the apprentice was to have a love of and belief in God. The apprentice was expected to attend to his religious duties, including going to mass each Sunday. He was also expected to be loyal to his master and to obey him, give him the proper respect, and keep his affairs confidential. The apprentice was to learn the master’s marks and prices, and also to learn how to figure weights and measures, learn something about the places his master traded in, to learn about merchandise of all kinds, and learn how to make deals. The rest of Savary’s book provides instructions on virtually everything a merchant would need to know about almost every sector of commerce and for most parts of the

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<sup>46</sup> Browne (1616), p. A2.

European world-economy.

John Browne's *The Marchant's Avizo* does not discuss the ways parents might discover the budding merchant, nor does it give a specific curriculum for apprentices, but it does offer some recommendations for young merchants making their first trip abroad. Many of Browne's recommendations echo Savary's instructions. Browne stressed the importance of attending to religious duties; the young merchant should perform his daily duty of prayer and thanksgiving to God. Browne also stressed keeping the master's affairs secret and being obedient to the master's instructions. *The Marchant's Avizo* includes information on various commercial cities and on the principal products, and it also presents examples of the various kinds of correspondence and other kinds of business writing. While not exactly a letter-writing manual, Browne's book (as well as sections of Savary's book) provided young merchants with some of the same kinds of instruction found in proper letter-writing manuals. Indeed, model letters of the kind that Browne presented to his readers were meant to be imitated by merchants in the course of their business.<sup>47</sup> Young English merchants must have found Browne's book useful; it was printed initially in 1598, and then again in 1590, 1591, 1607, 1616 and 1640.<sup>48</sup>

The author of *The Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* (London, 1721) directed his little manual to those merchants who had just recently completed an apprenticeship. He wrote that the manual contained "directions to young shopkeepers, and other tradesmen about their setting up in the world when they come out of their apprenticeship."<sup>49</sup> The author included practical advice to young merchants; he told them to focus on their business and not get caught up in "fancy living," and also to get advice from more experienced merchants. Indeed, he pointed out that "young men prosper best, when they have either served as journey-men" or "have the happiness to be taken in as partners unto such, whereby, as bears by their grown cubs, they are taught to catch the prey with the greatest cleverness and certainty."<sup>50</sup> But *The Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* was not written only for the benefit of young merchants. The author sought to provide "all things

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<sup>47</sup> Roger Chartier, Alain Boureau, and Cécile Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, translated by Christopher Woodall (Princeton 1997), pp. 68-69.

<sup>48</sup> Hooek and Jeannin, Vol. 1 (1991), pp. 55-56.

<sup>49</sup> Anonymous, *The Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* (London 1721), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

necessary to be known by all those who would thrive in the world; and in the whole art and mystery of Trade and Traffick.”<sup>51</sup>

### Information for Experienced Merchants

As the author of *The Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* indicated, more experienced merchants could use the same manuals that were directed toward apprentices and younger merchants to find models for business writing, examples for keeping accounts, and to obtain information about how to comport themselves as merchants. Experienced merchants, however, needed access to information about unfamiliar markets and new products, whether they were acting individually, working for a large firm, or acting as a functionary of one of the new joint stock companies. The great variety of merchant manuals insured that virtually any type of business information could be obtained by merchants of all stripes. Authors striving for a complete presentation of commercial information included such a vast array of topics that their books could be used by both young merchants and well-heeled practitioners. But for the most part, experienced merchants had needs different from their younger brethren, so they were not always drawn to the same manuals that young merchants were.

Wyndham Beawes's *Lex Mercatoria Rediviva or, the Merchant's Directory* (London, 1752) was a massive work that attempted to cover every conceivable topic of concern to merchants. In the book's preface, Beawes said that he wrote it with the hope that it would be “serviceable to many, whose entrance into business might need some assistance and direction, tho' at the same time not despairing of its being useful also to those of a longer standing and practice.” Beawes was likely humoring his audience, because the material he covered in the book was for readers with considerable commercial knowledge.

Manuals written for merchants interested/engaged in extra-European commerce invariably assumed a certain knowledge base on the part of their readers. In *Guide du Commerce*, Gaignat de l'Aulnais devoted relatively little space to trade with American Indians, preferring to explain to his readers which products were most in demand in the West Indies (manufactured goods, cloth and clothing, and slaves) and which American

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Title page.

products were most in demand in Europe (indigo, coffee, cotton, skins, etc.). Gaignat's discussion of the best times to trade in the West Indies was based on his knowledge of the storms that hit the area from July to September. He urged merchants to restrict their operations in the West Indies to Autumn and early Winter when the storms were fewer, and the sugar harvest had come in.

By the eighteenth century trade in the Americas was essentially a European project.<sup>52</sup> The same could not be said for the Asian trade, despite the maritime might of the European powers. In Asia, European merchants were confronted with an ancient commercial culture that they could not easily displace. The old-style handbooks on weights and measures were particularly important in the Asia trade given the unfamiliarity of Europeans with Asian terms. Books like Robert Stevens's *The New and Complete Guide to the East-India Trade* (London, 1775) included tables of weights, measures, and currency exchanges along with lists of important products.

## **Conclusion: Communication Media Compared**

How did merchant manuals compare with other business communication forms available in the early modern period? Information delivery could be divided into two broad categories: verbal and written. Verbal communication meant to transmit information about new markets and products required that the individual or group wanting information meet face-to-face with someone who had had experience abroad. Multiple informants would have been even better in providing a complete picture about unfamiliar markets and products. In this regard, merchant networks, such as merchant guilds, had the potential to provide more complete commercial information verbally than might be available to the merchants of just one firm. Indeed, the agents of commercial firms routinely participated in merchant guild activities in order to enhance their position in foreign markets.

While precise data are lacking, it seems certain that the proliferation of merchant manuals in the early modern period led to a significant reduction in the kinds of interpersonal communication that merchant networks facilitated. Increased literacy

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<sup>52</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "Communications and Trade: The Atlantic in the Seventeenth Century", in *The Journal of Economic History* 13 (1953), p. 378.

among merchants allowed them to obtain more information from more than one point of view than verbal communication would have allowed. Merchant manuals obviated the need for face-to-face contact and allowed merchants to learn about foreign places without traveling to them. In this regard, merchant manuals may have given their readers an advantage over those who relied solely on verbal communication, but merchants certainly never stopped interacting with each other.

Firms employed newsletters and other kinds of correspondence, handbooks, reports, and notes to convey information back and forth between headquarters and distant agents. Firms also sent individuals abroad to collect information about foreign products and market conditions. In most cases the information firms collected was meant only to be consumed by agents of the firm rather than to be exchanged with other merchants. Certainly merchant manuals could provide some of the same kinds of information that firms had been collecting and manuals could do it at a lower cost.

Organizations combined aspects of hierarchies and networks in order to insure success in the marketplace.<sup>53</sup> Individual merchants, merchants organized into guilds, and merchant firms, all used the same types of media to exchange information. Merchant manuals were one of several tools merchants had at their disposal to gain commercial information. Merchant manuals presented their readers with several advantages over other forms of communication.

First, merchant manuals allowed for detailed coverage of a broad array of topics. These topics changed somewhat over time as the informational needs of merchants changed. The earliest manuals focused on the nuts and bolts of commerce: general instructions on calculating currency and measurement exchanges. These kinds of manuals were common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Manuals intended for the instruction of merchant apprentices were also common during these two centuries. During the seventeenth century books that focused on trade regulations appeared. Commercial dictionaries became available also by the end of the seventeenth century, and were even more common during the eighteenth century. Trade and travel literature describing important commercial cities and extra-European commercial centers were also

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<sup>53</sup> The idea of combining methods for communication exchange was influenced by Nee's work on combining informal and formal constraints. Victor Nee, "Norms and Networks in Economic and

important during the eighteenth century. Rather than displacing more traditional ways to exchange information, merchant manuals presented merchants with a new medium for obtaining commercial knowledge.

Second, manuals allowed merchants to benefit from the experience of a larger number of merchants than may have been possible through other forms of communication. While few merchants would have had the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the likes of Jacques Savary or Gaignat de l'Aulnais, they did have access to their ideas through the manuals they wrote. Merchants interested in Amsterdam's trade had the works of several authors to consult, rather than the impressions of just one informant. Likewise, merchants hoping to make their fortunes in Asia or the Americas could gather information about products and markets (and weigh the potential risks such a venture might present) before undertaking a risky voyage.

Finally, manuals offered the profession a way to educate practitioners in the art of commerce. Whether they were geared toward apprentices, those just off their apprenticeship, or experienced merchants, manuals provided instruction and advice, and could serve as "a remembrancer, which they may turn to for the solution of any difficulty occurring in the course of trade."<sup>54</sup>

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Organizational Performance", in *The American Economic Review* 88 (1998), pp. 85-89.

<sup>54</sup> Wyndhan Bewes, *Lex Mercatoria Rediviva or, the Merchant's Directory* (London 1752), Preface.

An education in commerce: Transmitting business information in early modern Europe. In L. Muller & J. Ojala (Eds.), *Information flows: New approaches in the historical study of business information* (pp. 63–83). Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. Retrieved from <http://www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers1/Harreld.pdf>. People, information, ideas, and products did travel extensively in early modern Europe, probably much more than people imagine today. But they traveled much more slowly and laboriously, and at a higher cost, which makes the volume of movement against so many obstacles that much more impressive. Early modern communication took place in three main modes: spoken words, manuscript writing—especially letters—and print. Oral communication was the oldest of these three, and in many ways early modern society was still primarily an oral society. Business letters were the means whereby merchants exchanged vital information such as exchange rates, the availability of products, the level of demand in various markets, and threats to shipping. Timeline of Early Modern Europe. Reformation ca. 1500-1650. Notwithstanding these dramatic changes, political power in Early Modern Europe remained concentrated in the hands of the upper class, composed primarily of nobility and clergy. A fundamental struggle emerged between the middle and upper class of each nation, often spurring attempted revolution. The Church was also a major political and economic force, with many clergy holding posts in government and education, and enormous wealth being collected from land holdings and taxation. As the medieval period drew on, however, resistance to Church authority grew, due largely to the rise of the middle class (which possessed the time and literacy to study and denounce religious oppression).