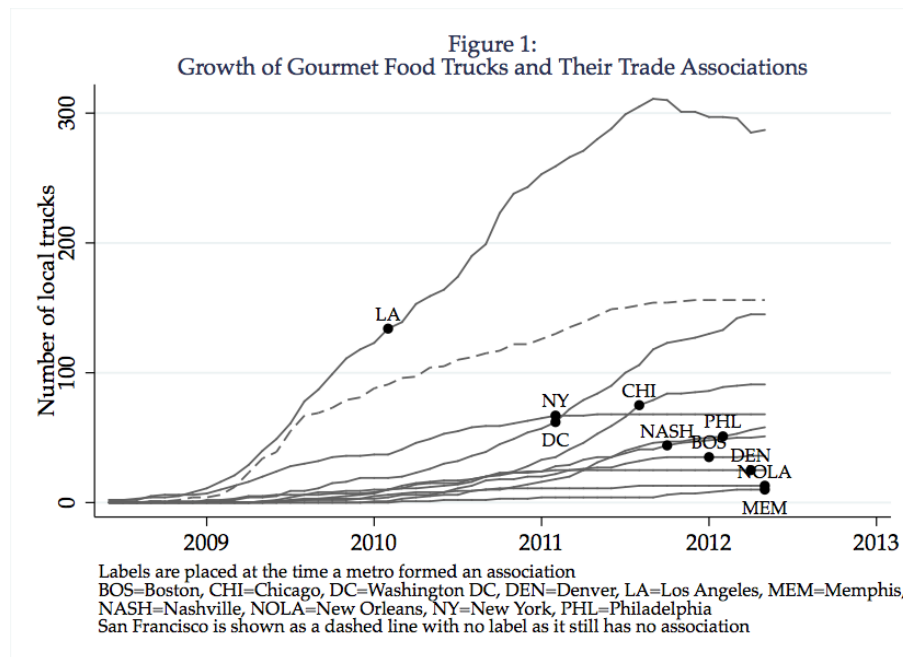


From Imitation to Concatenation

Nicole Esparza, Gabriel Rossman, and Edward T. Walker

This article develops a two-stage model for the formation of large but dispersed organizations. In the first stage small organizations develop to serve local needs. As each organization is founded, it helps institutionalize the form and this reduces the cost to further foundings (Hedstrom et al 2000, Rossman 2014). In this stage although new organizations are founded in imitation of each other, their relationships are horizontal and the authority of first-movers is at best one of informal status. In the second stage, local actors recognize the hegemonic leadership of a leading actor and create structure through institutionalizing this actor's role to create hierarchy, power, and organization (Martin 2009).

We base our analysis on the gourmet food truck industry and especially the development of trade associations representing the collective interests of food trucks. Gourmet food trucks are a very recent industry, with the earliest trucks opening for business in late 2008 and substantial growth over the following years (Esparza et al 2014). The trucks face a variety of regulatory issues and coordination problems, almost all of them at the county or municipal level. The first trade association formed to organize these interests was the SoCal Mobile Food Vendors Association, founded in early 2010. Since then many other cities have founded MFVAs. As seen in Figure 1, the earliest associations were founded in cities with large numbers of trucks to represent but then through 2012 spread even to cities with extremely new and small food truck industries. That is, the practice begins where local conditions support it but then as the practice becomes institutionalized it spreads even to marginal circumstances (Tolbert and Zucker 1983) and becomes an almost automatic action (Rossman 2014).



A second stage for the food truck associations begins in 2013 with the “Roam” conference for food trucks, which for the first time brought together large numbers of food truck entrepreneurs and social movement entrepreneurs on a national scale. Following the conference, the National Food Truck Association formed in early 2014 as an umbrella organization for local associations. This national association institutionalized what had previously been the informal influence of the founder of the SoCal Mobile Food Vendors Association. This process reflects the model articulated in *Social Structures* that large structures emerge out of the concatenation of small local structures.

Although our data is based most directly on the recent past of the development of the National Food Truck Association, our two-stage model of diffusion and concatenation also applies to other, more enduring, institutions. Most notably, Christianity developed in two-stages with the endogenous diffusion of locally autonomous churches from the first through third centuries and then the development of authority for metropolitan bishops and the pope in the fourth and subsequent centuries (MacCulloch 2010, Stark 1996). Likewise, the process characterizes the formation of the United States, in which the establishment of each colony established precedents for chartering the next and then during the revolutionary and founding period the colonies coalesced into a single nation-state.

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