

IACC: a Door to Enter the American Market. An Interview with Director Comini

Marina Melchionda (December 30, 2008)



The Italy-America Chamber of Commerce promotes a broad range of imports from Italy since 1887. Director Comini explained to us how the institution carries out its goals and how it promotes the Made in Italy label in the United States. He also talked about the contingent economic crisis and the



role Obama will have in solving it.

[Italian version of the interview](#) [2]

We met with Director Alberto Comini after the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce gala at the [Rainbow Room](#) [3] in New York City. We share the brief chat we had to highlight an institution that has significantly strengthened the economic relationship between the two countries.

First of all, Director Comini, please explain the main functions of the Italy-America Chamber of Commerce.

Let me begin by saying that the IACC was founded in 1887, when the first Italian immigrants came to the U.S. These immigrants knew little about industry, production cycles, or machines. Their expertise was in hand-crafted merchandise and domestic manufacturing. Thus the range of imported goods was limited to the wine and food sector. It was back then that American citizens first tasted and enjoyed our food and flavors. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of people with an Italian background has grown steadily, and with it so have the goals of this institution. Today we promote a broad range of imports, including those from the automotive, chemical, and information technology sectors.

How do you carry out the Chamber's mission? Do you partner with government agencies and institutions located in Italy?

We collaborate with [Unioncamere](#) [4], chambers of commerce throughout Italy, and with [Confindustria](#). [5] We also try to involve local governments, along with public and private institutions operating in particular fields. We represent them, their interests, and their partners here in New York. For example, we have established a partnership with [Sviluppo Lazio](#) [6] (Lazio Development) in which Italian pharmaceutical companies receive financing through American banks and financial institutions.

Was the IACC the first joint commercial institution founded in the U.S.? Why Italy and not another country?

No, I don't think that Italy was chosen in particular. You see, the first Italians who came to this country at the end of nineteenth century were very enterprising. They, as opposed to people coming from other parts of the world, did not come here simply to become rich. They chose to stay, to start a new life.

My great-grandfather did the same. He was a painter, and he used to travel all over the world to decorate churches, monuments, and government buildings commissioned by high-ranking officials and clergy.

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That was the choice made by many Italian immigrants. However, they never forgot their roots. They transformed them into a new source of income and started to import products from their hometowns. Thus, both the Italian and American governments began to realize that these people could become a solid base on which the IACC could be established. From then on, this institution has been committed to strengthening the commercial ties between these two countries.

What impact do your activities have on the Italian economy?

Entering the American market is very important for Italian entrepreneurs and consequently for our entire economy. The global economic crisis, however, could harm our exports. We have already found that the demand for some of our products, especially the “luxury” products, is decreasing. This is not because people are no longer fascinated by Made in Italy; this label still remains a guarantee of quality and style.

What does the IACC do to protect the Made in Italy label from counterfeiting?

Our battle to protect our firms began decades ago. We appealed to Congress and the American government but we did not obtain significant results. It is not an easy task to accomplish. All kinds of Italian products are being copied and counterfeited on a daily basis. For each industrial sector we need to find an effective way to curtail the practice, but it is not easy or straightforward, especially if you consider that the American government often turns a blind eye when these cases are tried. This tendency, if we can call it that, deeply affects our economy. For our part, we do our best; we assist our clients and members by giving them access to the best lawyers. It is also difficult to determine the exact parameters of what is Made in Italy and what is not. These days I would r

refer to our products as being made “by” Italy, given that our best designers manufacture their products in Southeast Asia. We need to find a new way to identify our products, a way in which they can still be identified as Italian regardless of the geographic location where they were manufactured.

You talk about the battle that began decades ago. When did you become director of the IACC?

It was four years ago, but I have been a member of this Chamber since 1971. Before becoming director, I was elected first vice president and then executive vice president. Over the years, however, I never abandoned my role as president of [Omnia Industries](#) [7], the company I founded in 1964. It produces door handles and locks both in Italy and in the U.S. I have always thought that carrying out these two roles simultaneously positively affects my performance.

How do you feel about your role as director of the New York branch of the IACC?



I must confess that I would have preferred to have this experience in another city. Do not misunderstand me: I love New York. I love everything about it and I also feel a special attachment to the Italian community that lives here. But perhaps it is because of the community's vitality that I would rather go somewhere else. I would like the challenge of bringing and promoting Italian products in those areas of the U.S. where they are more unknown. That's the only way in which I could really test my abilities.

Don't you think that you still have many challenges to face here in New York? For example, there is the economic crisis. How will it affect the IACC's activities and goals in the near future?

First of all, we will work to strengthen our partnerships with many Italian entrepreneurs in various fields. We are trying to involve Italian construction companies in some projects headed by the city of New York, such as the plan to build a bridge over the Hudson River to connect New York City with New Jersey. Obtaining contracts of this kind could be fundamental for those companies that want to expand their businesses within the U.S.

With Unioncamere, we are organizing a new ad campaign to increase exports from southern Italy. For the time being we are trying to promote this area's most important brands. In the near future, we will promote medium and small-sized companies.

Which partners will work with you on these projects?

We will work with the Italian institutions located here in the U.S. I am referring to what we call the "Sistema Italia" (Italian System) that consists of the [Consulate General](#) [8], the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [9], the [Italian Trade Commission](#) [10], and the [Italian Tourist Board](#) [11]. With their collaboration we are trying to encourage Italian entrepreneurs to show more initiative. In fact we all believe that this economic crisis is also an opportunity: it requires us to find answers and strategies to respond to the new global economic order. My intention is to take it and transform it into a new challenge which we

will overcome.

How will the new U.S. presidential administration affect these goals?

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I believe in President-elect Obama for two reasons. First, from a sociological point of view, I think that he will enhance the United States' reputation after a long period of decline. Second, I think that his "New Deal" will help America out of this economic crisis while modernizing the national industrial infrastructure. I am aware that there is no real difference between Republican ideology and his macroeconomic plan, but I also believe that this is the only path to pursue at the moment, especially since it will help to create more than two million jobs. Given that when people have more money they tend to spend more money, it is reasonable to expect our exports to rise. So why not? Let's give Obama the opportunity he deserves.

Is Obama's "New Deal" compatible with the new global economic order?

I think that national economic policies are still important, but it is necessary to develop them with a new global order in mind. I also believe that it is important to encourage more collaboration between the public and private sectors. The IACC is working on this. For instance, we continue to support Piero Bassetti's project. In his latest work, "[Italici](#)" [12], the Italian politician and entrepreneur proposes the construction of a global network where all people of Italian descent, together with those who study or simply love Italian culture, meet, spread, and share their knowledge and interest. We hope to build a similar network, but one with an economic and commercial focus.



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