

Claudio Del Vecchio: The Key to Success is in Learning How to Listen

Maria Teresa Cometto (October 22, 2018)



Interview with Claudio Del Vecchio, CEO of American luxury clothing brand Brooks Brothers, which celebrates its 200th anniversary this year

You were born in Borgo Valsugana, a village of 7,000 people in Trentino-Alto Adige. How was it growing up in such a small place?

Actually, I was born there because that was the closest hospital to my home village, Pieve Tesino, where there are less than 1,000 people! My grandfather had a little hotel there. But I didn't really spend much time in Pieve Tesino because my parents were very busy, and moved around a lot. Agordo, in Veneto, is the town where I really grew up. I was four years old when my father opened Luxottica there. So, I actually grew up in a town of 3,000 people, where you know everybody... it's like a family. And Luxottica was of course the biggest employer. The town now still has less than 5,000 people, and our factory there employs over 6,000 people there. Basically it's Luxottica, the hospital, and 50 bars...



Luxottica is the world's largest eyewear company and its foundr - your father, Leonardo - is the second-richest person in Italy, with almost \$19 billion net worth, according to Forbes. What is like to be the son of such a famous father?

When people ask that question it's always about the money, but for us it's never been that. When we grew up, there was no money. And I don't think my father has ever done anything for the money. It was always about making something beautiful and sell it and to be successful at that. Before Luxottica my father worked in a garage making tools for other companies. A frame manufacturer was one of his customers. At a certain point he thought, "well I think I can do that job better than they are." So he started making frames and partnered with them. Then he bought them out. He did the same with distributors in and outside of Italy. The greatest lesson my father taught me is, "see the challenge, and make it an opportunity."

You came to the US in 1982 to help develop [Luxottica](#) [2]'s business here. You were 25. What struck you the most about New York City?

I remember how tough it was to eat good food!

Actually I've read that when you were living in Connecticut you opened your own restaurant just because you couldn't find a good restaurant in the area, right?

Yes, I opened an Italian restaurant, Trevisan cuisine.

You anticipated a trend...

I lost money for 10 years... but I ate very well!

In 1997, after much success, you resigned from Luxottica and became your own entrepreneur by buying Casual Corner, a chain of women's apparel stores. Then you bought [Brooks Brothers](#) [3] in 2001, just after 9/11. How did you find the courage to go on with your plan to buy the company in that difficult year?

Actually I was trying to buy it a year before that. As I was trying to fix Casual Corner, which wasn't going well, I realized we were paying too much in rent. One solution would be to buy a business with good logistics and take advantage of that. Brooks Brothers came to mind. As a longtime customer I felt they weren't doing a great job, and I thought I could do better. In fact the company was put up for auction, it was supposed to close on Sept. 13, 2001. I didn't think I had much chance, to be true, but two days before the deadline the attack came and the auction fell apart. Months later, when they decided to continue the process, I felt that, for the right price, I would buy it. I loved how New Yorkers were reacting and I felt, "if New Yorkers come back, Brooks Brothers will come back."

Why Brooks Brothers anyway? You told me that the first store you went to when you got to New York was a Brooks Brothers store. Why and when had you become a fan of Brooks Brothers?

Well, when I was in Italy it was a very well known fact that Gianni Agnelli [a major Italian industrialist, owner of FIAT] used to wear Brooks Brothers shirts. I was a teen ager and Gianni Agnelli was like royalty for many of us, we knew what kind of shoes he wore, what kind of jackets, the tailors he used. And I wondered, "Why a guy who could buy anything and who is Italian - and definitely a lot of great shirts are made in Italy - why would he buy Brooks Brothers shirts? You couldn't find Brooks Brothers's products in Italy at that time, so when I came here and saw a Brooks Brothers store I went in. I liked what I saw and I became a customer. Even before buying it, ten years before, I worked with them: I got the license for Luxottica to make Brooks Brothers glasses.

Coming back to food for a moment, I heard you're planning something about food and Brooks Brothers...

I believe in retail. So many changes are happening in this field and I do believe food is going to be part of the solution. First of all food has always been in my blood. You know, in my grandfather's



hotel I used to serve at the bar and at the dining table while he was playing the piano. Also, my grandmother was the chef there and I was trying to help sometimes. So I guess food is in my genes. This said, as consumers go more and more online today there are less and less reasons for them to go out and shop at regular stores. Traffic in the stores has been decreasing dramatically in the past two years and in order to attract and keep people you need to innovate: on the product, the process, the experience. That's where food comes in. In retail you have to deliver more of an experience—and food is one experience you can't get online. You can buy great food online, but you can't have the experience. So if we can associate a food experience with retail maybe we can be more successful.

Besides food, are you bringing an “Italian taste” to the brand, in some way?

Well, my opinion does count at Brooks Brothers, of course, but I am not a fashion designer, though I like a certain kind of aesthetic. Most of all I am a customer and I am pretty good in feeling what a customer may like or not. But we do have Italian fashion designers – not just because they are Italian, but because they're good. As for materials, definitely the vast majority of fabric and row materials we use here in our factory we buy in Italy. Even for stuff we make in Asia most of the fabric comes from Italy.

What do you think are the weaknesses and strengths of the Italian fashion industry?

Well, first of all we understand beauty in Italy. I think we have a better sensibility about beauty than probably any other country. You walk around and you see history, architecture ... beauty becomes part of your genes. This is the reason why we have an opportunity in this business. The reason why we don't always take advantage of that opportunity—there are many, but one is that we tend to be a little arrogant at times. We come from Italy, you know, and we think we know everything just because we grew up surrounded by beauty. So at times we speak too much and we listen too little. They say we have two ears and one mouth for a reason ... but while we do remember that we have a mouth, we tend to forget that we have ears. Especially when you go abroad you've got to listen, to learn, to integrate. There are many Italians who do, of course, and they are successful everywhere in the world and in all sectors: in fashion and style, in hospitality, in mechanics. But those who are not successful, very often it's because they don't listen. You have to leave your arrogance behind.

How much has the attitude of New Yorkers and Americans toward Italians changed in the 35 years you have been here?

I don't think the attitude changed. I think the kind of Italians that are here changed. We represent and bring different things now. When we first got here we were probably one of the few cultures not to keep their language. Back then, immigrants didn't want their children to speak Italian because they were discriminated against; they really wanted their children to become American. The Italians who come here today hold on to their language as much as they can. And not only language. Take food. The Italians who came 80-100 years ago knew how to cook, but they didn't have the right ingredients. So what became known as Italian cuisine was not actual Italian cuisine at all, at best it was American cuisine made the Italian way. But the new people, the new Italians who came later brought new food and new cuisine. Italian cuisine is very different in New York today than it was when I arrived. And now the Americans and visitors to the city get to know what Italian food is really like, what being Italian really means. Today you can be Italian everywhere in the world.

* Maria Teresa Cometto is an Italian journalist and award-winning author based in New York City. Since 2000, she has been covering business, finance, and high-tech for *Corriere della Sera*, the leading Italian newspaper.

From the series, “Managers: from Italy to Top Global Businesses,” held at the Italian Cultural Institute of New York. The complete conversations, filmed by i-ItalyTV, are available on our youtube channel at www.youtube.com/iitaly. The following excerpts have been edited for publication.



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