

COLOMBINI

MADE TO MEASURE

The Colombini family firm has conquered the living rooms of Italy from its base in the mini-state of San Marino. The company's young boss Emanuel Colombini is now setting his sights on New York, Tallinn, and Shanghai.



📄 SVEN HEITKAMP

📍 OLAF HERMANN

You could hear a pin drop when Emanuel Colombini talks about his strategies for the future of his furniture company. The young executive—who is only in his mid-thirties, although he has already been at the helm for a few years—folds his hands thoughtfully and speaks with a quiet voice. A charged silence envelops the managers arrayed in black leather chairs around the dark conference table. They are impressed by the authority and charisma of the young man, who—following his father's untimely death—assumed his father's mantle with visionary ambition, clever precision, and a reserved demeanor.

And with great success. Since Emanuel Colombini took over as head of operations at the mid-sized furniture company, he has nudged the San Marino-based group onto world markets with panache and great ideas. Under his direction and the presidency of his uncle Ivo, the company has become a sophisticated industrial furnishings specialist with roughly 1,000 employees in six factories and annual turnover of 180 million euros, with customers through-

out Europe, Russia, Asia, and North America. His recipe for success: Italian lifestyle for the middle class.

The Colombinis' furniture adventure began in the 1960s—a time in which the Riviera was a popular holiday destination. The founders, Emanuel Colombini's father and two uncles, quickly made a name for themselves furnishing the fine hotels of Rimini. But the good times couldn't last forever, so the brothers branched out into bedrooms and children's rooms.

Today, top-selling items include bright, colorful bunk beds with stairs, wheels and rounded forms for the *bambini* as well as simple, clean forms and reserved grays for *mamma* and *papà*. The Colombini Group has been atop the Italian market in these areas for years. And not only that. In 2009, the young boss bought the kitchen manufacturers "Febal" and "Rossana," two premium brands that embody the highest design standards. The acquisitions rounded out the group's product range and garnered significant market share.

In contrast to a certain Scandinavian furniture discounter, however, Colombini rarely →





The young heir to the family business, Emanuel Colombini, successfully heads the company that bears his family's name. "The search for beautiful forms," he says, "is an important part of our corporate philosophy."



Purple, red, white, or wood-colored: Customization options are an important part of Colombini’s appeal for customers.

appears under its own name in its home market. Seven brands—among them “Artec” and “Sofup,” “Golf” and “Vitalty”—have been developed under the group umbrella. All of them share the Colombini philosophy: Italian style, smart, chic and uncomplicated, firmly ensconced in the mid-range segment, and combined with perfect service. Emanuel Colombini knows: his customers—generally young families—don’t want dime-a-dozen shelving units or rickety dorm-room sofas; they want high-quality, functional design that provides good value for money.

With the “Made in Italy” label, he is looking to address younger demographics both at home and abroad that appreciate the Italian lifestyle and are willing to pay a bit more for innovative home furnishings. “Good design, beautiful, lustrous surfaces, and a variety of colors are our key to success,” says Colombini. To make sure that those high standards are met, he employs an in-house “Centro Stile,” an idea factory that follows current trends and continuously develops new materials and products. Ten architecture studios design the actual furniture. Among them is that of star designer Matteo Thun, a student of Oskar Kokoschka, who has designed countless award-winning buildings and design objects in Europe. For Colombini subsidiary “Febal,” Thun’s studio recently de-

signed the multifaceted Primavera kitchen system, noted for its linear, avant-garde look.

Colombini customers are also treated to comprehensive service: they can choose the size and color of many pieces in the store or at home on their computer. The desired dimensions are simply ordered online, and delivery is generally within two weeks. Customer service and delivery of quality spare parts are assured after the purchase as well. Colombini’s industrial backbone makes it all possible: computer-controlled mechanical production lines enable customized production in great quantities and short delivery times (see “The Colombini System” on p. 40). Some of the machines were manufactured—and patented—especially for Colombini by major German and Dutch companies.

But it is not only the family firm’s portfolio that has been augmented. With a combination of patience, prudence, and courage, Emanuel Colombini has pursued a course of cautious opening in order to make “Colombini” more well-known, bigger, and more successful across the world. Under his father’s stewardship, the company with the discreet Greek temple as its logo didn’t even practice direct marketing. In the second generation, however, it has launched a public presence— →





VIVID COLORS AND LUSTROUS SURFACES ARE AMONG THE KEYS TO COLOMBINI'S SUCCESS. THE CHEERY COLORS ARE ESPECIALLY POPULAR AND CUSTOMERS CAN CUSTOMIZE MANY PIECES IN THE SHOWROOM OR OVER THE INTERNET – THE COMPUTER-AIDED CUSTOM MANUFACTURING PROCESS IN SAN MARINO TAKES CARE OF THE REST. THE COMPANY ALSO HAS ITS OWN “CENTRO STILE” AND DRAWS IDEAS FROM RENOWNED DESIGNERS LIKE MATTEO THUN.

From living rooms to bedrooms—Colombini has a wide product range. That requires clear structures.



THE COLOMBINI SYSTEM

The fully automatic furniture production at Colombini is clockwork precision in action. Porsche Consulting helped optimize processes.

One after another, bright boards speed along the conveyor belts. Green, pink, blue, orange, red, and brown boards with bar codes move from machine to machine. They are cut, painted, and glued. The sounds of wood and machines rattling and screeching emanate from every corner of the multi-story factory. A fully automatic, seemingly endless high rack storage system stores the finished parts in its depths before yielding them again for the next work step. Computer screens blink, employees in gray overalls roll down long corridors on bicycles, driverless transport cars drive along yellow markings as if steered by some magic force.

The fully industrialized furniture production from Colombini in San Marino has as much to do with carpentry as fretwork has to do with CNC technology. The machines run

45 000
individual parts

from 6 am to 9 pm, and through the night if need be. 45,000 individual parts are produced daily. To distribute them to customers, 36 semi-trucks pull up to the

company's docks each day. To ensure that the factory runs not only with clockwork precision, but also highly efficiently, Colombini called in the services of Porsche Consulting. And it's paid off: production capacity has risen by more than 20 percent,

20⁺%

while throughput times for the parts have been reduced by a third—from eight to a maximum of five days.

The reform process was aided by the development of a Kaizen organization, which now has a department of its own for continuous improvement in the company leadership. In addition, the concept of "Total Productive Maintenance," or TPM, was incorporated into the production process. This comprises cross-plant planning to ensure better-coordinated factory processes, loss and waste reductions, stricter controlling, and improved qualification of employees. The result: efficiency gains of up to 50 percent in some locations. Colombini now follows the example of the Leipzig Porsche plant, practicing just-in-time and just-in-sequence manufacturing. All parts

are delivered at exactly the time and in exactly the order in which they are needed.

Sometimes simple steps made a big difference. The advisers from Porsche Consulting meticulously examined the causes of machine downtimes—and either corrected them or established consistent maintenance intervals. Whereas previously machine breakdowns were accepted with fatalistic equanimity, undesired interruptions have now been reduced to a minimum. "An hour of planned maintenance is better than a half-hour of unplanned downtime," says Federico Magno, CEO of Porsche Consulting Italia, in explaining the underlying philosophy. The result is optimal utilization of manpower and material, less deviation,

50⁺%

reduced storage times, and fulfillment of short turnaround times. "We have transitioned from reactive to proactive maintenance of the factory systems," says Magno. Colombini's wooden boards speed through the hall with greater precision than ever before.

abroad at least—under the label “Colombini Casa.” “Colombini Casa” is opening brand stores with trained staff to press ahead with the internationalization of the group and thus minimize its dependence on the domestic furniture industry. “The Italian market is saturated,” says Emanuel Colombini. “We can only generate growth abroad.”

With stores in Paris, Madrid, Stockholm, Tallinn, and Kiev, the young manager is conquering new territory. Colombini is even making strides in the USA: in 2011, he opened his first kitchen showroom in New York. Colombini now operates more than 120 brand stores and his products are represented in around 5,000 furniture stores worldwide. And that’s just for starters. “We have a long road ahead of us,” says Colombini. “Doubling our growth rates is a feasible goal.” The company no longer produces only in San Marino and Italy, but has gotten its foot in the door of the Middle Kingdom with a plant in Beijing. “Colombini China” has a store in Shanghai and displays its wares in another 40 furniture stores. The young executive began to lay the ground-

work for the expansion shortly after taking the reins. For his managerial team, he lured away executives from larger companies such as Fiat and other carmakers. They brought expertise and good contacts. Emanuel Colombini also established a new department to work on developing sales. And it’s working indeed: Despite the turbulence generated by the economic and financial crises of recent years, the firm has not had to lay off any employees. On the contrary: 2007 saw a major expansion of the headquarters in San Marino. Moreover, the factory was optimized with significant investments and the support of Porsche Consulting.

Yet in spite of these successes, the man in the driver’s seat had not even been overly interested in taking over from his father. The little boy who had once bounded through his father’s factory was more interested in technology and wanted to be a race car driver. “But I was given to understand quite early on that one day I would have to take over the company,” says Emanuel Colombini. So he undertook studies in economics at the

nearby University of Bologna and helped out in the office whenever he could. After the sudden death of his father, he left the university and took over the family business—in his mid-twenties.

Just a few tokens of his childhood dream remain on the shelves of his office: trophies from the San Marino Grand Prix, photos from the last go-cart race for employees, models of Porsche cars. Emanuel Colombini seldom gets the chance to race. On the rare weekends when he isn’t working or checking out the showrooms of his competitors, he climbs into his Porsche GT3 and accelerates with care. Just like at the wheel of his company. ←



The final touches at the end of a mechanized production chain. Porsche Consulting helped Colombini optimize its manufacturing processes to save it time and money. Well-trained employees remain indispensable.