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THE REGINATO FILES

MICHAEL BRUNO CALLS FIRST DIBS

BY JAMES REGINATO

Michael Bruno, the man who virtually transformed the way the interior design industry shops, makes success look so easy. On a crisp autumn morning, he jogs into Le Caprice, the New York offshoot of London's most stylish café, clad in a U.S. Open sweat jacket, capping off his morning run through Central Park. A waiter quickly proffers oatmeal and berries. But there is so much more on Bruno's plate, figuratively speaking.

1stdibs.com, the online decorative-arts marketplace he founded a decade ago, just keeps growing, its progress seemingly unstoppable. In fact, today, the site—which has recently added sections for jewellery and watches, vintage couture and fashion, as well as 21st-century design—will unveil a digitalized archive of *Elle Décor* magazine, wherein customers can browse through thousands of interiors stories; by clicking onto objects that interest them, they will be shown similar products available from 1stdibs dealers. “It’s like a living, breathing tear sheet,” says Bruno.

Soon to debut is a fine-arts section. Twenty top galleries will be participating, including Gagosian, David Zwirner and Sperone Westwater. “We’ve had a category called “Wall Decoration” that included some fine art. Now we want to make it pure, not based on antiques dealers who have some art but based on dealers who specialize in art. It will focus on driving customers to the galleries’ exhibitions.”

Having become the authoritative virtual destination for the decorative-arts world, the company is about to plunge into bricks and mortar, too. A floor occupied exclusively by 1stdibs dealers will open by year’s end at the New York Design Center.

After Bruno sent an email to his roster of dealers announcing his plans, he received same-day commitments from 105 of them. With spaces for only 60, many were disappointed. “We sold out an entire floor over the Internet in three hours,” says Bruno, nonchalantly.

In the late 1990s, few would have expected a self-professed techno-phobe to become a digital titan. Then a real estate broker in San Francisco, Bruno specialized in high-end residences. “It was during the dot-com boom, so I was selling these massive houses to these young kids, who were cashing out. Of course, I wanted to be one of them,” he says.

With that incentive but little else, he sold his own house and bought a one-way ticket to Paris to seek his fortune. “Everyone thought it was so weird: *You’re moving from San Francisco to France to get into the Internet?* But that’s the only way I could do it. If I stayed in San Francisco, there is no way I would have given up real estate. I was so addicted to selling houses.”

Bruno’s inspiration came while strolling through the fabled Paris flea market, the Marché aux Puces: “I thought, wow, I will put this online. Just dive in and see if it will work. For years, so many American dealers had been going over there to shop. This way, they could buy from their offices.”

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With a French translator and a photographer, Bruno spent weeks shooting and cataloguing thousands of items. He adapted some of the business models he recalled from his real estate days. “Before the Internet really took off, we were using online search tools for multiple listings. With one-of-a-kind products, you can’t really make catalogues; they’d never be complete. So, the question was, how is somebody going to find this product without spending their whole day running around from store to store?”

The speedy and positive response Bruno received after posting the Paris marketplace led him to do the same with the wares of antiques dealers in the Hamptons and in New York City. Like brushfire, the site expanded from there.

It now represents over 700 dealers in 21 markets, in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and France.

Despite the site’s success, Bruno proudly clings to his computer illiteracy, which, he believes, is an asset to his company. “I’m the in-house computer idiot. But that keeps us dumbed down, so things don’t get too complicated. I fight with programmers all the time, telling them, ‘That doesn’t work for me. I don’t want to have to learn how to use it. I just want to go on and click.’ Our whole mission is, how do we make the search fun for the user?”

This isn’t to say that plenty of heavy lifting doesn’t go on behind the scenes. 1stdibs now employs six experts to check attributions of items posted on the site. “If you are going to call something, say, Royère, we are going to know who to ask if that’s right. For so long, there were many mistakes in the industry. But because everyone is operating

out in the open now, attributions have become much better. We have been a part of the clean-up process for the whole industry, which I never expected.”

But it also has made good business sense. “We maintain a high level of trust with our customers,” he says. “That’s key.” Impressively, 1stdibs continued its annual 30% annual growth rate last year. “Only five of our 800 dealers went out of business; they hung in there.”

Soon to launch are sections for classic cars, fine wines and real estate. Collaborations with Sotheby’s are in the works too—1stdibs plans to bring special collections exclusively to sothebys.com. “We have been incredibly impressed by what Michael has been able to build through his tenacity and acumen,” says Amy Todd Middleton, Sotheby’s worldwide head of marketing. “The editorial content on his site is spectacular. You can easily access a huge amount of merchandise in a magazine environment.”

“We want to position 1stdibs as a luxury-lifestyle brand, rather than just antiques and fine art,” Bruno says. “But it’s still a work in progress. Parts of the puzzle are not yet complete.”

With that, he runs home to dress for lunch with Karl Lagerfeld.

JAMES REGINATO, FORMER FEATURES DIRECTOR OF *W* MAGAZINE, IS WRITING A NOVEL.

