

Head of Estate: Michael Bruno of 1stdibs.com | JCK

How Michael Bruno turned his passion for antiques into a forward-thinking venture

[Nancy Sidewater](#) | December 27, 2010 |



Make no mistake, [1stdibs.com](#) is not an auction house. Rather, think of it as an umbrella for like-minded brick-and-mortar dealers—well-regarded names such as Kentshire, Primavera Gallery, and Neil Marrs, and more—who pay a monthly subscription to the site to reach a far-flung audience of very affluent consumers. (How affluent? The site has been known to feature rare jewels that cost as much as \$650,000.) Founded by Michael Bruno in 2001, the site began as a way for Americans to shop the Paris flea markets. And while 1stdibs continues to have a presence in the City of Light and now London, it has moved back to New York City and expanded to include carefully vetted antique and estate dealers, whom Bruno calls “customers,” from across the United States and Canada. Thanks to a range of experts in four major categories (furniture, art, fashion, and jewelry, which was added in 2008) and more than 2,000 new items each week, 1stdibs boasts 1.5 million visitors per month. Considering that the average jewelry sale rings in at \$20,000, Bruno has clearly cracked the code to selling high-end collectibles online.

What was 1stdibs like in the early days in Paris?

It was pretty straightforward. The dollar was on our side at the time. French 1940s [furniture] was just getting ready to take off in a big way, and people were buying it up. I hired a Web programmer and a translator, who came with me to the flea market with a clipboard, and a photographer, and we’d just go around and I’d pick out the pieces I wanted to put on the site. The translator would talk to the dealer and get all the information and the description and the dimensions and the photographer would shoot it.

The site features approximately 1,000 dealers—including about 100 jewelers—with more on the waiting list. How do you determine who makes the cut?

We treat it almost as if we were Bergdorf's—how would we edit our store? If I was the buyer for the home floor, would I allow this product to be shown in the store? If the answer is no, then they can't come on. And it's not necessarily that it isn't good, it's just not what we want. We like to fill out certain markets. We work with dealers and we learn what the taste level is. Our waiting list is a very real situation. Someone can only open a new account if someone leaves. In the last five years, we've probably only had about 30 customers leave, so it's not like we have a big turnover.

What are the benefits of being on 1stdibs?

No one even questions anymore that it's important to have a Web presence, so the important thing is how do you get the best Web presence possible? We spend millions of dollars a year marketing to the highest-end audience. We have a massive consumer audience. Probably 80 percent. We never purchased e-mail lists or anything like that. We've gotten it all through press and through high-end advertising.

And you also help to display the goods.

We have photographers in every market we work in. When we started, people weren't really very good at taking digital pictures and loading them onto the Internet. So we set up this system to shoot for them and upload and do the whole process. We offer Photoshop and imaging services, too, that they can use on our site and on their own.

How has business on the web changed in the last 10 years?

The willingness to buy very expensive things online has really grown. It's all about creating customer confidence because once you've done that, you can generate a lot of sales and help build new relationships between dealers and buyers. We hear all the time that dealers are selling a lot of expensive pieces online without the customer ever coming in to see them.

Why include editorial on the site?

I wanted to do it right from the very beginning, but we were so busy [getting the site up]. In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck, I wanted to go to New Orleans—we have a big New Orleans-based dealership—to check on everybody. And we realized we needed to get the message out, so we decided to do a story about New Orleans and how you could still shop it. It started with that one story and it's just never stopped.

What's most important in creating a site?

People want really good images, really good information. And prices. We encourage our dealers to show their prices but we don't enforce it. We let people do business the way they want to. But generally, if it doesn't have the price, [customers] may not even bother asking and they move on.