



Mauro Porcini: Advice on Building and Promoting the “Italy Brand” Worldwide

Letizia Airos Soria (October 24, 2019)



Mauro Porcini, Senior Vice President and Chief Design Officer at PepsiCo - the Italian Behind PepsiCo - discusses his passion for design, his career path and experience working for both Italian and international companies, and shares insights on how to successfully build and communicate a coherent “Italy Brand” using business strategies and understanding the global landscape.

Mauro Porcini joined PepsiCo in 2012 as the company’s first Chief Design Officer. Through innovative design, Porcini has revitalized [PepsiCo’s](#) [2]image in pop culture with new products, packaging, advertising, and social media communication. He has provided this top company with a fresh new



approach that extends to brands such as Gatorade, Tropicana, Doritos, amongst hundreds of others.

With Mauro Porcini I have a conversation that ranges from his personal history, his work as a designer in America to some important considerations about “Italy Brand”.

We could say you brought Italian design to Pepsi ...

I brought design with an Italian approach.

Let’s start from the beginning, where does your passion for design come from?

I have two passions: the humanities and visual art.

They come from my parents, my father was an architect and loved drawing, he painted all his life. My mother had a passion for literature, she was always writing.

Just as I was getting ready to sign up for architecture, a schoolmate told me they just opened a new program inside the architecture department called Industrial Design. I took the test, got in and found the program of my dreams. I didn’t think there was a school for this. And so I began this fascinating, amazing journey.

When did you become aware that it’s important to combine passion and creativity with the market?

You figure that out quickly when you enter the professional world. But maybe the strongest revelation was when I began working for multinational companies. When you start to deal with global business volumes - I worked for a 30 billion dollar company. That’s what made me understand that I had to use design to create value for the company.

So what did you learn from Stefano Marzano?

Stefano Marzano was head of design at Philips. I met him when I had just entered university. I elected him as my mentor. I began to write to him, letters, about design.

Every time he came to Italy, I went to see his conferences.

Then he made a small gesture, he sent me two of his books in English because he said I really had to learn English if I wanted to do something in life. And this changed my life. I had been admitted to go study in Paris but waited a year and went to Dublin instead.

He also had a very humanistic, philosophical approach to design, he did it “all’Italiana”.

He brought a much more sophisticated approach. He inspired me. Then I began working in international companies and found out that everywhere else the approach was much more basic and business oriented. It was very different.

I started from his approach but eventually I also learned a lot from the Anglo-American culture.

In 2010 you came to America, to Minneapolis.

I moved to America while working for 3M. I had been working there since 2002. In 2005 I started leading my own American teams and in 2010 I finally moved there.

At first they didn’t want me to go to America. They thought that I had to remain in a place that was design-driven, like Italy. But in truth there’s no bigger mistake. If you want to change the culture of a business you have to start from its headquarters.



It was an interesting time. In that period in America, there was starting to be more awareness of the importance of design within businesses.

The media played an important role in this, they began to speak to CEOs and business leaders about design. Something that for example we don't do in Italy. Which is absurd because it's the country of design and the business media don't talk about design, which is an important player in our economy.

But going back to 2010, yes, some were understanding the importance of design in business but few were choosing to invest in design internally. And even if they did they made classic mistakes, they didn't set up the right structure.

I wanted to make a perhaps bold but fitting comparison between the mistakes that those companies were making then, like not investing in design and to letting their promotion get dealt with externally. Do you think that our country is doing the same now, in terms of nation branding and of creating an image of Italy in the world?

I think that our biggest difficulty right now comes from our cultural background. We are resting on the glory of the past in many different areas. The post-war era was very successful, not only in our country but internationally, in terms of branding.

Now we live in very different times, we have to learn how to dialog with all the other players and realities.

We have to understand what we have that others don't have but with less arrogance and more respect for other countries. And we have to understand what's important, what's relevant to other cultures so that we can promote our wealth our resources in a way that is aimed specifically at them.

We need to work on cultural mediation. Where would you start in order to build the Italy brand?

There is little cultural contamination and little dialog with other countries. It's important that we have this dialog in order to understand each other in a deeper way.

Just like in business, you have to understand what motivates the actors, to communicate.

How important is it for the promotion, in this case the promotion of Italy, to be integrated, not divided?

Very important. If you don't have a unique, coherent story as a brand, you can easily become schizophrenic. You behave differently every time and you lose authenticity. So it's very important to have one story and to show how this story can be applied to different contexts and situations.

We also have to consider our weaknesses, starting from the fact that we have the reputation of being very creative but also chaotic, not capable of working on process, strategy.

This creates mistrust towards our country that oftentimes leaders have to overcome. Another weakness is our incapacity to work together. We are jealous.

The third weakness is our difficulty in scaling up. This is tied to our incapacity to delegate, organize and strategize.

If we have an idea that's born in Italy, but then we have to produce in China and sell around the world and we have a marketing team that's only in America, then we have a problem.

Because such a global approach requires a structured system.

How did you get to PepsiCo? What were the most important steps?



It was a good time for the company. PepsiCo was in a moment of great change. I met with Indra, our CEO, during the interview process and I understood that she would have given me the opportunity to express myself. I had never worked in the food and beverage industry, it was a challenge and a risk. But I like to push myself out of my comfort zone.

What was the first thing you did in Pepsi?

When you start in a new company, you have to create value to gain credibility.

So one of the first projects with which we brought value was the redesigning of PepsiCo.

Pepsi had many different images in different countries. We brought them together and created one unique coordinated image, which had great success both in terms of brand engagement but also in terms of productivity.

And from there it all started. Indra, our CEO, gave me the possibility to create my own team. I hired a few people in New York, I created the physical design space here in Manhattan. From there we began to build demand within businesses.

Fast-forward to now, 6 years later, we have 220 people, we are hiring, we keep growing, we have more locations around the world. And now design is stronger than ever.

What I like a lot about American businesses, is the total meritocracy and the mobility of the market so you can attract the best talent, and even if they're not the right fit, they move, reposition themselves. It's something we don't have in Italy.

Tell me about the famous Pink Lion.

I was in Minneapolis and I saw this fiberglass lion in the street. I liked it and picked it up. I put it in front of my house and painted it pink. Part of it was to celebrate my “Italianita” (lion of San Marco). Part of it was to celebrate my creativity and not taking myself seriously. It was a symbol and it became famous, people started coming to photograph it. A reporter from Fast Company came to do an interview and took a photo of me and my wife in front of the pink lion.

Let's talk about Italy. You told me about the steps you took in Pepsi, now can you tell me about the steps you would like to take for Italy?

I would identify who the target audience is. Entrepreneurs, people who want to visit Italy, or maybe people who want to invest in Italy. Or maybe we're trying to create a “sistema paese” that we want to export abroad.

So we identify the different types of target audiences and we find out who are the influencers for each one. Then we decide which are the values that we want to sell to these target audiences. In each country, we have to find Italians who live there and can help us create the right message for that context.

And another great resource, here for example, are the Americans who love Italy and are very competent.

Exactly, mixed with Americans who understand Italy.

A concrete example is Milan's Design Week.

It's the most important business event in Italy, it attracts 500 thousand people each year.



During Design Week, Milan promotes all types of sectors, automobile, fashion, food and beverage, etc.

When delegations come here in New York to promote Milan Design week, all the communication is focused on interior design. So they lose huge investment opportunities.

If we talked about Design Week as an occasion to be exposed to innovation in all sectors, or even where to propose your ideas to an international and varied audience, it would bring incredible investments to Italy. And this is just one example.

This interview is part of a series of Letizia Airos Soria's lectures at the [Master of Internationalization and communication of the 'Sistema Paese' at Link Campus University](#) [3] in Rome.

She is also a member of the [Scientific Committee of this Master](#) [4].

St. John's University in collaboration with Your Italian Hub presents A Night of Design with Chief Design Officer of PepsiCo Mauro Porcini, an event dedicated to discussing the social and economic impact of design thinking and human-centered design with one of its major and most successful exponents.

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