

From father to son, anchored to the same values

The generational change at the wheel of Ideal-tek SA has not altered the DNA of the company.

Despite fifteen years of deep and inevitable technological-organizational transformation, the company has never lost sight of the inspiring principles of its founders.

Born in 1973, a degree in economics from the University of Friborg, two children – Gianmaria, aged 14, and Timoteo, aged 11. This is, in short, the profile of Sandro Grisoni, CEO of Ideal-tek SA: the company co-founded in 1964 by his father Franco and Marco Grassi, under the name of Ideal Outils SA.

Sandro is undoubtedly one of the most dynamic and brilliant young entrepreneurs from Tessin. We met him on a sunny February afternoon, and he immediately touched us with his enthusiasm and his inexhaustible visionary planning. After the interview, he wanted to show us the production line, proudly highlighting the important contribution that each of his 50+ employees give to the growth and the prosperity of the company every day.

But how has Ideal-tek changed since its foundation? Is its core business still the same or has the company progressively reinvented itself in 57 years of activity? We asked Sandro directly ...

Over the years, there have been profound changes, as it always happens!

We started the business by producing and selling precision tweezers. Today, beside tweezers, we produce other precision tools and we also deal with other market related high-quality products. In short, our goal is to offer a one stop solution. Clearly, also our business model, processes and organization had to adapt to the times. Managing an organization is a constantly evolving project!

At the beginning of the year, your father Franco passed away due to Covid-19. What values, human and entrepreneurial, did he pass on to you?

My father and his partner Marco Grassi were entrepreneurs driven by clear ideas and values. They were genuine people who openly declared their intentions, believed in them and acted accordingly. The values I inherited from them, and which I pursue on a daily basis, are: aiming to provide the highest quality products and services, respecting those who work with us and protecting the environment.

When you took over the company, did you feel a sense of dizziness or did you already have clear ideas about the direction to take?

After taking over the company from my family, I was able to count on my father's support for a couple of years. I worked hard to build the necessary trust around myself and my role with all the stakeholders, so that they would support the ideas which made Ideal-tek what it is today. My entry into the company in 2001 coincided with the beginning of a historical period in which technological innovation accelerated all company operations. We have had more technology changes in the past 20 years than in the previous 40 years.

How much has the company been changing under your leadership? We know that your management strategy is strongly inspired by the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility ...

Ideal-tek's production today is a combination of processes including both automation and labor-intensive craftsmanship. Our people have always been at the center of our choices and, consequently, social responsibility is an integral part of our DNA. Today we have more resources, so we are pushing and implementing advanced and articulated CSR initiatives: not only for the community and the well-being of

our employees, but also to improve our company's environmental footprint, because we aim at being as sustainable as possible.

Ideal-tek, like the vast majority of Tessin industrial companies, is an exporting company: your products currently reach 40+ countries. What are the most important target markets for you?

Over the years, we have diversified countries and segment risk factors, pushing our commercial and marketing efforts where we wanted to grow or to strengthen our presence. First of all, we consolidated ourselves in the original sector of our company – electronics – and then, starting from the mid-2000s, we have been expanding to become a major player in the "life science" and "medical device" sectors as well. We have also succeeded in entering mature markets such as watchmaking. As for our geographical expansion, I can tell you that North America and Asia represent the markets where we are most successful and where we plan to grow further: in the short and medium terms.

How do you conquer a new market? What is the process to follow when you want to approach a new target country?

Winning new customers and markets has always been one of the most interesting activities of my work. The logic for developing a new market, or segment, is similar. First of all, we launch a market study to identify existing commercial opportunities, development costs and potential benefits in the medium term. Our global network, trade shows and the ability to assess competitors help us evaluate opportunities and make decisions. It is important to have a strong and coherent "value proposition": to properly understand the needs and the values that target customers can perceive. Finally, we adapt the organization and communication to better serve that specific market.

In a globalized context, does the "Swiss Made" brand still represent an element of excellence and distinction?

Being a Swiss Made company is a challenge that goes far beyond the wording through a logo or a flag. Doing business as a Swiss Made company requires compliance with stringent legislation. The resulting advantage, however, is formidable. The Swiss Made label on our products positively qualifies them in the consumers' minds and throughout the Supply Chain. Owning the DNA of a Swiss company is an important, competitive factor. Globally, the concept of Swiss Made is mainly appreciated for its identity and reliability: from product performance to a real "country brand" that benefits a company. The Swiss Made label generates high quality and price expectations in the consumer. In "price sensitive" sectors, this can represent a barrier to overcome. On the other hand, in those sectors where high quality is critical, we are positioned better than our competitors.

How difficult is it to remain competitive on the global market by producing in Switzerland at Swiss costs?

This is our ongoing challenge to maintain our competitive advantage. I have no secret recipes or magic formulas on this. We try our best to break down any low value-added activity and to enhance those that generate most value for us and our customers. The processes we have been activating are digitization and innovation in the purest sense of the terms. The cultural metamorphosis of the company has been undertaken to overcome the "status quo" in favour of a radical and continuous renewal of what we do and how we do it and it has impacted the company at all levels. We like to think of Ideal-tek as a living organism which evolves, adapts and transforms itself, following the constant changes in its value chain.

Speaking of innovation, you have started fruitful collaborations with academic institutes... Can you tell us a little bit more about it?

Sure! For more than twenty years we have been regularly collaborating with SUPSI, with which we have launched several R&D projects. We also had the pleasure of hosting seven of their undergraduates. This collaboration, which continues over time, has allowed us to establish a particularly profitable relationship for both parties and to fill the enormous burden of knowledge necessary to interact with companies operating in 40 different countries. Getting back to SUPSI, it is a school with a distinctive approach to practical training. Currently, we are working with SUPSI on the "KITT4SME" digitization and innovation project, funded by an European call for proposals which connected SUPSI (as project leader), Ideal-tek, other SMEs and research institutes in 9 different countries.

Many entrepreneurs in Tessin complain of a progressive impoverishment of the conditions offered by our region, they fear that we are moving towards a progressive process of de-industrialization... Do you share these fears?

Tessin has the structural advantage of being a small and formidable area (at least on paper) to encourage investments in a context of low system risk and potential agility, for companies supported by effective institutions. The relaunch of the Canton is possible through a joint action. It should synergistically involve the training and financial structures, businesses and institutions. The systematization of these excellences could generate a very powerful movement which has not yet found the perfect virtuous synthesis.

Do you have your own personal recipe for the economic revival of our Canton, also considering the further difficulties caused by Covid-19?

Covid-19 has stressed everything and everyone. The country system has worked well. As an entrepreneur from Tessin, I am proud of how the various offices - at cantonal and federal level - have responded to this exceptional event. The crisis was faced with a clear strategy and an agile as well as strong organization. In a short time we adapted to new emerging market conditions. At cantonal level, we should implement a greater risk culture that can stimulate important private investments, supported by an area that is full of know-how, excellent workers and effective institutions. As I said before, politics, the economy, financial and educational systems should speak the same language again.

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