

The appeal of 'Made in Italy' is the envy of the rest of the footwear world, and yet, when academic Dr Giuliano Noci addressed a group of young industry professionals from all parts of Italy recently, he had to warn them not to waste the opportunity afforded to them by their location and their heritage.

Italy needs to tell its special story better

An academic from the Polytechnic University of Milan, Dr Giuliano Noci, has told young footwear industry professionals that the 'Made In Italy' label is "an opportunity for growth that they must not waste". Speaking in July at the annual general meeting of footwear industry association Assocalzaturifici's young entrepreneurs' group in Modena, Dr Noci pointed out to his listeners that they have a number of advantages. He said that the industrial set-up that exists in Italy, with all the design expertise, machinery and raw materials that footwear manufacturers need available to them on their own doorstep, means the industry there is capable of creating products "of unrivalled excellence".

He said, though, that there is a danger of some producers failing to make the most of this opportunity, of failing to play

their trump card, usually by failing to realise the role that marketing and "brand storytelling" play in today's competitive global market.

Reflected glory

Shoe manufacturers the world over go to great lengths to try to have some of Italy's footwear glory reflect on them and it's not uncommon to see brands from Turkey, India, China and elsewhere apply Italian-looking names to the shoes they make and sell. It's no coincidence that it was an experience in Italy at the turn of the century that inspired three-time best actor Oscar-winner Daniel Day-Lewis to stop acting and devote ten months to learning the art of shoemaking. He was on holiday in Florence and, while walking in the Borgo San Frediano district on the south side



The new generation of footwear company leaders in Italy knows it has inherited a significant heritage in quality and know-how.

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Italian footwear firms have everything in place: design, materials, machinery, manufacturing expertise. But they must get better at telling the story of Made in Italy.

of the River Arno, became fascinated by the shoemaking work and artistry of the late Stefano Bemer, who had his workshop there.

"What brought them together (and what made me decide to step up and make an offer to continue Stefano's adventure) was perfectionism," explains Tommaso Melani, now chief executive of the Stefano Bemer brand. "Daniel Day-Lewis and Stefano shared the same passion for their respective forms of art: one does not play a role but rather becomes his character; the other would not make shoes but rather give form and matter to his ideas. If you have seen the former acting and the latter making shoes, you know what I am talking about."

Popularity overseas

In 2014, almost 85% of the business Italian shoe companies did was in export markets. They brought in almost €7.5 billion in total for the year. More than 5,000 (mostly small- or medium-sized) firms are involved in an industry that employs 76,000 people in total. More than 40% of Italian footwear manufacturers export more than half of the shoes they produce and fully one-fifth of shoe companies in the country export more than 90% of their output.

It's clear from these figures that Italian companies are committed to providing customers in the global market with high-quality, high-value shoes and that the world wants the product, but Dr Noci's challenge, that they make the most of their Italian credentials, is a less straightforward one for smaller companies to embrace than for larger players with more plentiful resources. His view is that small companies in Italy have not yet been able to develop a deep or mature enough awareness of the role that telling the story behind their brand and their products must play in the competitive



Made in Italy represents "unrivalled excellence" according to Dr Giuliano Noci of the Polytechnic University of Milan.

arena that companies have to exist in today. In terms of the products they make, Dr Noci believes Italian footwear firms pay the greatest possible attention to detail and to quality, but he feels the choices they have made with regard to how best to tap into the qualities that 'Made in Italy' conveys have often been "incoherent".

Heritage of quality and know-how

Current president of the Assocalzaturifici young entrepreneurs' group, Gilberto Ballin, helps run his family's high-end footwear firm, Moda di Fausto, which has its headquarters in the Riviera del Brenta cluster near Venice. He says he and his colleagues feel responsibility for "the great heritage of quality and know-how" that they have inherited from previous generations of Italian shoe producers. He says the Italian industry's young generation is also aware that this heritage can offer it a competitive edge and that social media and information and communication technologies can play an important part in helping them achieve this. Gilberto Ballin also acknowledges that footwear firms can learn from the experience of Made in Italy brands from other sectors.

A focus on social media is one of the things Giuliano Noci (who publishes on Twitter his own 'daily newspaper', a set of online news stories from around the world of interest to him and his followers) is most keen on. In truth, though, the message matters to him more than the medium. "Italy has an incredible story to tell," he concludes. "Italian culture is already well known and well respected in Europe and in other western countries, but we are not so well known in China, not yet anyway. But I would say people around the world are positively predisposed towards Italy. We have to tell Italy's story." 📢