

10 years. £15million . Artigiano - Fashions Best Kept Secret

Submitted by: Dee Carpenter Public Relations

Monday, 7 March 2005

The most successful mail-order company in its sector of the market, Artigiano has grown fast, its fame spread chiefly by enthusiastic word of mouth, but it has never lost sight of its unique vision. Founded in 1995 by Claire Locke and her husband, Glyn, Artigiano has always been very single-mindedly about the best of Italian style.

Claire may have grown up a home-counties schoolgirl in Henley on Thames but she spent her teenage summers in the bosom of an Italian family. She remembers, "Italian women always looked fabulous, always in the current style, beautifully groomed and elegantly dressed. I was intrigued to find out how they did it."

"Certain things were obvious. The fabrics were wonderful and the quality of the manufacture and the details were impeccable. But what really impressed me was the way women would accept no less. It's a factor I can only describe as perfectionist - as being very fastidious and discriminating. It's about caring very much about your clothes and how you wear them. That stylishness is not genetically acquired. It's a cultural thing. Everybody talks about clothes, cares about clothes, has strong opinions about clothes. It's as natural as breathing."

"When I was a teenager staying in Italy I'd come down to breakfast and everyone at the table would talk about what everyone was wearing. Did the outfit work? Were the accessories right? Should you maybe go back upstairs and change something?" Claire was enchanted, indoctrinated, seduced. She embraced totally Italian style and Italian perfectionism. She even decided what career she was going to pursue. "All I ever wanted to do was to import clothes from Italy. It was not exactly evangelical - I didn't have this mission to convert British women to copies of Italian women - it was more about sharing a wonderful discovery - a way to dress that always looked good and that made clothes a great pleasure and life a hundred times easier."

After a gap year working in Switzerland and at the British Institute in Florence, she took a BA in PPE at Oxford - specialising of course in economics - and then married her childhood sweetheart and began to work in his company, Glyn Locke Racing Shells Ltd which manufactured high-performance rowing boats. "This was all about getting practical, hands-on experience in a small business," she says. In 1984 she launched Scala Collections Ltd with contracts to act as UK agent for two of Italy's most respected manufacturers. Over the next decade Scala became a major supplier to many of the UK's up-market retailers, producing own-label collections for Austin Reed, Aquascutum, John Lewis and Selfridges. Across the country the company also developed a network of agents who sold branded collections to around 450 independent retailers.

It was during this period that Claire had her two sons, Anthony, now 16, and Alex, 14, and Glyn sold his business and the family moved to the Isle of Wight. "Although we were lucky enough to be able to choose where we lived," says Claire, "we did need to earn a living. I loved my business but thought maybe there was a more exciting way to work. We knew from the sample sales we held in our home that our friends absolutely adored the styling and quality of the ranges we were buying in Italy. It struck us that, instead of putting other people's names in the clothes, we should launch our own brand."

Managing a chain of shops from the Isle of Wight seemed like a recipe for long-term exhaustion. "But," says Glyn Locke, "fashion is a dynamic business - that's its essence - and it is open to innovation in more ways than most industries are."

The couple noticed the beginning of a new phenomenon. Specialist companies, some of them very creative, some just quirky, were starting to create niche mail-order catalogues. These bore little relation to the vast, door-stopper productions of the traditional catalogue companies. They were more like the special-interest magazines beginning to pour out of the new desk-top publishing enterprises and tended, in fact, to be very editorial in concept and tone.

"We thought," says Claire, "that this would suit us brilliantly. We may have been starting the business on a huge overdraft and at the kitchen table but we aimed for the production values of a glossy fashion magazine in order to reflect our position in the market. And we called it Artigiano because it means artisan in Italian and, for me, it expressed quality and pride in good workmanship. Then we put a small ad in Vogue." From that moment the phone at Artigiano has been ringing off the hook. "At our first company Christmas party," says Claire, "there were four of us. Next year there were eight... and now there are nearly 100. We have our own call centre, two retail outlets, extensive warehousing and a stunning new headquarters building which won a RIBA award."

Claire, too has begun to win awards. In November 2004 she was awarded Business Person of the Year by the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce, hotly followed by Artigiano's win of The Best Catalogue Award by ECMOD - against some stiff competition

As it celebrates its tenth birthday Artigiano's forecast turn-over is £15 million. Over the next three years the expansion plan has set a target of £20 million by 2008. Claire used to say that the division of labour between Glyn and herself was simple to explain - that she looked after today and he took care of tomorrow. "Now, with a proper management structure, I think it is more accurate that I concentrate my efforts on product development and Glyn looks after special projects - particularly ones to do with building. But we do the strategic planning together."

When she's asked to account for Artigiano's success, she ticks off the stylishness, accessibility and clarity of the catalogue and the website and the quality of the service the company gives its customers. But most important, she feels, is the fact that Artigiano delivers on its aim to exceed customers expectations. "There are two strands to Italian fashion design," she says. "There's the Versace, Moschino, Dolce e Gabbana look that's essentially raunchy and there's the coolly elegant strand of which Armani is the master. We work within the latter to produce the best of Italian design, the best of Italian fabric, detail and manufacture, cut to fit British figures. And it works. "Women seem to acquire an Artigiano habit, so perhaps the secret is out."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR JPGS PLEASE CONTACT;

DEE CARPENTER tel 020 8780 9944 dee@deecarpenterpr.co.uk or
DAWN JARVIS tel 020 8780 9944 dawn@deecarpenterpr.co.uk