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Alessandro Barberis Canonico,
CEO, Vitale Barberis Canonico



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Alessandro Barberis Canonico

Vitale Barberis Canonico

When it comes to the production of some of the finest textiles in the world, few companies do it better than Vitale Barberis Canonico. This might partly be down to the fact that the Italian woollen textile maker has been doing it for a very long time – in fact, since 1663. And, during all that time, it has been a family business. Now run by the 13th generation, with Alessandro Barberis Canonico at the helm, Vitale Barberis Canonico is a great example of how tradition and innovation can work together to create a 21st-century family business with roots in the 17th century.

Alessandro Barberis Canonico tells an intriguing story about the origins of his family business. When his family were doing renovation work on their house, they found some distinct holes in the foundations. “We were pretty certain they were dying wool in these holes, because there was a river running near them, essential for the dyeing process, and they were stained with the black from the dye. This was the first proof of our activities.”

Those activities were the making of textiles and Alessandro’s family business Vitale Barberis Canonico. The official date the company gives as its starting point is 1663, although the holes Alessandro talks about suggest his family’s link to textiles goes back even further. Whatever the actual date the family started in textiles, Vitale Barberis Canonico today runs one of the world’s most prestigious and successful woollen mills. In 2016, from its headquarters in the town of Pratrivero, about 50 miles north of Milan, Vitale Barberis Canonico made around

Tradition and innovation

Vitale Barberis Canonico is an exceptional example of a family business that combines its fabled traditions and history with the innovation and entrepreneurship of a forward-looking, 21st-century company. Its traditions are of course made up of its extraordinary history, but also its continual commitment to the region in which it has been based for more than 350 years. These traditions, combined with its longevity, saw Vitale Barberis Canonico become a member of the Henokiens, the prestigious Paris-based association of bicentenary family businesses. These are companies that have been continually operating and family owned for 200 years or more, and whose descendants are still involved in their management.

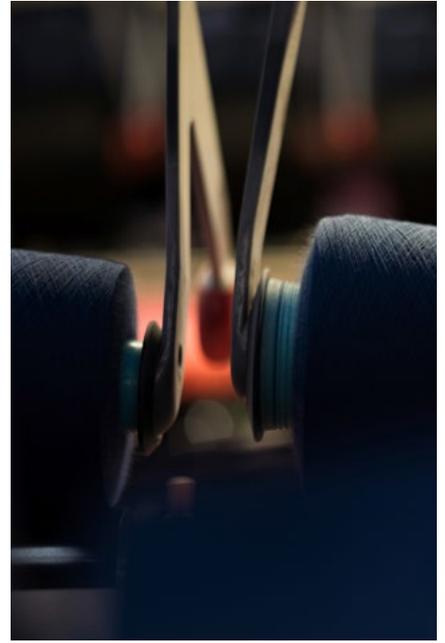
Yet, despite its extraordinary longevity, Vitale Barberis Canonico’s progress has not been without its challenges. In 1936, the business was split into three after disagreements



Vitale Barberis Canonico has 350 years’ experience in the wool business, and the mainstays are still fabrics, family and Pratrivero.

9.5 million meters of fabric; as Alessandro says, “That’s long enough to stretch from London to Beijing.” Last year, revenues for the company were €150 million and exports accounted for around 81% of those revenues. Altogether, Vitale Barberis Canonico employs 430 people, with most of them based in the company’s two mills in Pratrivero.

among the many members of the 10th generation of the family. One of the new businesses emerging from the split was run by Alessandro’s grandfather Vitale Barberis Canonico, and his name became the brand name of the new company. After navigating the business through the difficult times of Mussolini’s Italy and World War II, Vitale oversaw strong growth in the 1950s and onward. He did this by moving the business



Last year, the company produced 9.5 million meters of fabric, used to make more than 3 million jackets and suits, and has introduced 4,000 patterns and colors of fabric.

more into high-end textile production and employing the state-of-the-art technology that has been Vitale Barberis Canonico's trademark ever since. In the 1970s, the business passed to Vitale's sons Alberto and Luciano – the 12th generation of the family business.

The two brothers use their respective skills – Alberto, the engineer, develops the technical side of the business while Luciano, the economist, develops international markets. In 2009, with the business in good health, Alberto and Luciano stepped down from day-to-day management and passed the business over to the 13th generation. Alessandro, Alberto's son, became Managing Director. His cousins Francesco and Lucia also came into the business as Creative Director and CRM Manager respectively.

Governance simplicity

Alessandro says the family's relationship with the business is steered through the board of directors. The board has six family members and three external members. "The origins of the business may go back to the 17th century, but Vitale Barberis Canonico is really a family business run by the third generation, going back to 1936," says Alessandro. He says this defines the governance structure of the business, which relies on the board to define the relationship between the family and the business. "The next generation may be inclined to add further layers of governance," he adds.

Nevertheless, a family business that has its roots in the 17th century inevitably has a very well-defined culture; one that is tied up with Vitale Barberis Canonico's relationships with its stakeholders. The strong links to Pratrivero and its local region – Biellese Prealps, the heart of the textile-producing area of Italy – helps to instill very strong stakeholder values. But these values are also about the teamwork of all Vitale Barberis Canonico's employees, says Alessandro. "Our success is in many ways due to our excellent teamwork as a business and our unique workplace atmosphere. All our employees are able to work synchronously on the same goals from different perspectives, and achieving them individually means making the company successful as a whole."

On top of that, Vitale Barberis Canonico's deep relations with its customers, including famous Italian fashion houses and many of the best tailors in London's Savile Row, ensure loyalty. "The loyalty of our clients allows us to develop the best possible products for them, and no one else." This helps to establish exclusivity and brand value for the company.

Every year, the company invests around €14 million in new technology, says Alessandro, which helps to secure its competitiveness. He adds that the skills of the company's employees are very high. They have to be, given the relative cost of labor in Italy compared with cheaper textile-producing countries in Asia. But, beyond these factors, how does Vitale Barberis Canonico stay competitive? Alessandro says the



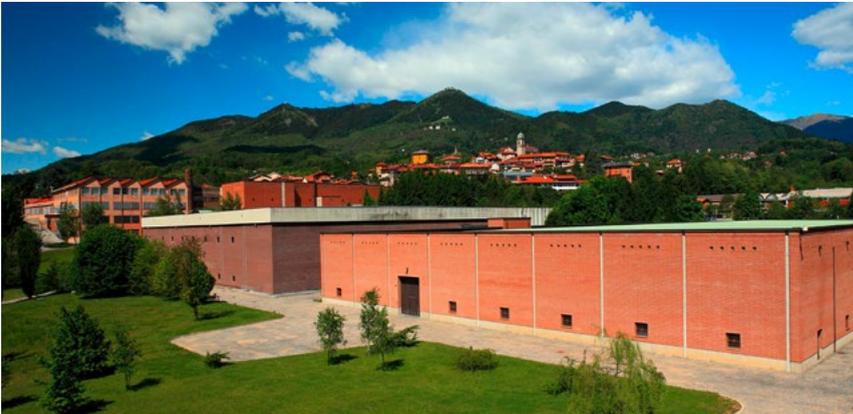
From left to right: Chiara and Luciano, members of the board and Alessandro's cousin and uncle; Francesco, Creative Director and Alessandro's cousin; Alessandro, CEO, and Daniela, member of the board and Alessandro's aunt; Lucia, CRM Manager and Alessandro's cousin; Alberto, Alessandro's father and Vitale, founder of Vitale Barberis Canonico.



Pictured above, a special collection recovering the historical inheritance of Vitale Barberis Canonico in order to create a "cultural workshop" for new designers.

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All the phases of wool processing are carried out in the historical buildings in Pratrivero in the Biellese Prealps, the heart of the textile-producing area.

company adheres to three principles. The first is never to compromise on quality – all their products are made in Italy from the finest wool. The second is to have very short lead times in order to fulfill customer demand. And the last is a substantial investment in cutting-edge technology. Alessandro says his mills are among the most fully automated in the world. He summarizes all this as: “invest in product and process.”

What about the next generation – the 14th? That is some way off. The oldest of the next generation is 13, and Alessandro's son is just 12. But, with such a strong culture of business excellence built over an extraordinarily long period, the values and success of Vitale Barberis Canonico are pretty much assured for many years to come. Perhaps Alessandro's distant antecedents will be relating the same stories about the fabled origins of the family business as he does today.

Alessandro Barberis Canonico

CEO

Company name: **Vitale Barberis Canonico**

Generation: **13th**

Founded: **1663 in Pratrivero, Italy**

Industry: **Fashion and textiles**

Employees (2016): **430**

Revenue (2016): **€150m**