

furniture WORLD

Retail Success: Astone Home Studio

Generally speaking, when you contemplate any of our great industry success stories, there springs to mind a logical natural progression, a variety of ups and downs and the occasional moments of insight. But with the ongoing tale of Enzo and Frank Astone and sons Michael and Daniel, the past 30 years have been marked by lightning strikes of inspiration, startling creativity, and an apparently instinctive feeling for target demographics, all firmly rooted in their sturdy foundation of “honesty and passion”, the brothers’ credo.

Their original brain child, Superior Frames Ltd., began as a small, traditionally rooted but highly creative manufacturing enterprise with the basic intent of providing solid wood frames to the local upholstering industry.

The company developed powerful off-shoots, both national and international, in hospitality, hotels and casinos (Superior Seating Hospitality), and fully furnished sales suites for major condo developers in the Greater Toronto Area (Superior Suites Interiors). “They’ve called us their interior design ‘secret weapon’”, said Enzo, CEO. As the technological age encroached upon us all, a vibrantly visualized and colorful online retail store/consumer shopping website came to life (lovethatinterior.com). Most recently, reaching out to acclaimed interior designers and, through them, the affluent consumer, they opened the doors of Astone Home Studio, at present one location in the City of Vaughan, north of Toronto close to theme park Canada’s Wonderland. Down the road certainly more Studios are featured in their master plan. Obviously, the sky’s the limit. Or maybe not.

Our question to them, since they’re willing to share their thinking, is how did this come about? What is embedded in the Astone story that explains and makes accessible their success pathway? What’s the secret, guys?

Enzo immediately replied, “Passion!”, closely followed by “Honesty!” Passion is joy, intensity of focus, creative energy, “Perhaps a bit of craziness!” he laughed. And honesty? “Professionalism and integrity, belief in our history, insistence on perfection, quality, superb service and demonstrable value.” From this evolved the corporate identity expressed in the name “Superior”, no accident, a key to the fulcrum of the

dream, and ongoing, infinite branding. “Superior defines who we are.” Of course, there’s more to it. Much more.

Many decades ago, the beginning before the beginning, the Astones grew and thrived in Cosenza in the province of Calabria, Italy, a mountainous region near the tip of Italy’s boot, a city of memories perched 600 metres above the sea. Enzo and Frank’s parents owned a wood-working enterprise, crafting windows and doors for local construction companies and their neighbors. First Frank, and then Enzo, restless entrepreneurial teenagers, set their youthful sights on the broader horizons of North America, at that time and maybe still, the continent of opportunity.

Said Enzo, “Frank was already working at American Frames when I arrived in Toronto, and I joined him there. I was a teenage troublemaker, ambitious, wanted to make things happen, still do. Frank is more pragmatic, he can strategize and implement, he’s both creative and good with numbers and planning. He couldn’t speak English and neither could I,” he laughed again, “and I still can’t! But it didn’t matter since 90 per cent of the people in the furniture industry couldn’t either.” Fluent, articulate, Enzo’s richly calibrated Pavarotti accent is warm and engaging. “But not too many years passed, both of us observing, focusing, looking to find new ways, and mining our own creativity, defining potential markets, before we launched our own small business, just five capable and dedicated employees at the outset.”

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The brothers met and came to know Angelo and Christina Marzilli and their family also, of course, of Italian origin, and the visionary founders of Décor-Rest Furniture, “In fact, the Marzillis were our first customers! They were our mentors, they practically adopted us, and their philosophy also revolves around profoundly focused passion and honesty. They believed in us. They are part of our history.”

Michael Astone added, “My father and my uncle applied their innate, strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit to good effect. Their passion set them on their way, building what has emerged as a large furniture conglomerate”.

Michael, also an investment banker, is Vice President Sales and Marketing of lovethatinterior.com. “It’s a full, on-line retail department store, a balance of far-sighted design direction with recognition of traditional values, top-of-the-mark second millennium technology and insightful social engagement, interactive with competitions and coupon exchange. We’re strategically entering target markets where we can obtain a market-leading position given our depth of knowledge and expertise in the region. From Canada, to the United States to London, to Tokyo to Germany, we’re here to service consumers around the globe and, best of all, our products are delivered at the click of a mouse.



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“It was in the early 2000’s that global competition primarily from China was hurting Canadian manufacturing. Superior Frames was faced with pressure on prices from Chinese manufacturers. Enzo and Frank made a strategic decision to shift focus off the company, and they branded Superior to be a high end retailer, ‘the Ferrari of furniture’, where clients would get premium products and excellent service. We weren’t going to compete with low-cost low-quality Chinese manufacturers. This strategy has served them well, and has allowed them to grow into new markets seamlessly.

“The brothers’ core philosophy of the business back in time and to this day, was to provide excellent customer service and exceed their expectations, and this helped attract loyal customers who appreciated their quick turnaround and more personal, active hands-on approach.

“Continuously investing in state-of-the-art technology including the latest CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machinery and Copying Lathe machines programmed by our experts, has given us the competitive edge we need, together with robust advanced designer systems.” The technology permits more accessible customization, emboldens customers to customize, to use their own imaginations. Our two new manufacturing warehouses now total approximately 60,000 square feet.”

Their team of more than 100 highly trained employees is engaged in all facets of the conglomerate’s interests from research and development, to engineering, production,

sales and marketing and customer service. Said Michael, "It's rare for me to walk into our production facility and not see my father walking around, meticulously checking all of the orders to ensure the highest quality and integrity of our products.

Said Enzo of Michael, "He (and Daniel, too) have the passion! Like their mother, Francesca, they have a unique sense of colour and they share Superior's mission."

The Astone's close-up-and-personal mindset extends to their far-reaching and markedly effective communications network. Enzo emphatically declared, "We have never advertised!" Astonishingly, Superior's founders, sons and their integrated corporate family team transmit their message only by "word of mouth"! It begins in the workshops, the very tight, meticulous controls, the intimate relationships and communication between all members of the team, the shared vision and integrity of all players, and the attitude to quality, value and service. Additionally, Enzo commits project managers to monitor individual orders. The result, an impeccable high-end product, always delivered on time, as designed, exuding value and always appreciated by clients across the board of all the conglomerate's divisions. And scrupulous follow-up customer service contact enhances every transaction.

And then what happens? News spreads exponentially, people telling people, passing the accolades along, glowing recommendations from excited, satisfied customers informing potential satisfied customers... "word of mouth"! It works. It has worked from Superior's inception. With no diminishing outlook. "Everyone wonders what we will do next!"

And this remarkable "team", where and how do the Astones find such exceptional individuals? "We have not used an employment agency, ever," Enzo assured us. "We let our people know when we need more staff in whatever area. They come to us by (guess what?!) word of mouth. As a result, the company has become a family affair. We have had many of the same people with us for all three decades and more. A father might bring his daughter or son, cousins, to us, and they train, they educate one another in our methods! Each one is part of our 'think tank'. Each success spurs them on to the next one."

Michael said, "The career section of our lovethatinteriors.com website is also essentially word-of-mouth 21st century style, 'speaking' directly to qualified people who share our interests and direction."

"There is a set of rules at Superior," continued Enzo, "policies that encourage progress, open communication between staff members and divisions. This way every individual can influence the progress of the companies and take pride in excellence. There is constant interaction and exchange of ideas. It's democracy in action." The Astones passion, honesty, enthusiasm, energy and sense of fun are contagious and encourage the teams' freedom of thought and creative reach. "We work to inspire them, show them it can be done. Lead by example; develop the right environment for teamwork.

“Think about this. We reach out from the mundane, the boredom and the monotony of cautious thought, let people think large, crazy thoughts. It makes each person’s world a more exciting place; it removes borders and fences to innovative thinking. You can see a whole new world of possibilities and an appreciation of the possibilities of life. No barriers to the imagination.

“We avoid price comparisons and we urge our customers to express themselves, too, to go along with their imaginations, be creative themselves. It removes the implied restriction of showroom stock, gives them freedom. They can have a Vegas look, any look, fantasy or classicism if they want it.”

And speaking of Vegas, said Enzo, “When we go to Vegas, it makes me proud to be Italian! So many Italians are part of the scene, over-the-top fantasy architecture that stretches the mind, creates an ambience of fun, euphoria, imagination. Passion sparks passion.”

The Astones “walk the Markets. We enjoy seeing how lines are presented. And what the trends are,” Enzo continued. “Although we never copy anyone, we are sometimes influenced by them. Signature pieces, just like a painter, spark our interpretation of a style.”

Michael added, “Maintaining our competitiveness requires us to be up to speed on the latest design trends. We work with the most renowned designers to keep us on the high profile projects. This way we establish new and deepen existing relationships.”

The Astone family has always been much involved in charitable outreach, always especially interested in health related projects, and embracing campaigns close to their heart. Typically, they are often the go-to people when it comes to creating unique,



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quality furniture pieces like a concept chair recently that would lend itself to Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital's Pink Ribbon Cancer thrust.

Astone Home Studio also gave a sleek signature chair, "Sinatra", to the Hospital's Producer's Ball 2013, for their World Vision silent auction, an event scheduled to take place during the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) hosted by HGTV's The Property Brothers, Jonathan and Drew Scott. The celebrity décor-duo are also ambassadors for World Vision.

The Word from Enzo directed to young aspiring entrepreneurs: "Only attempt to make your mark in the furniture industry if you have a passion for the business to the point that your life is focused around it.

"And you must commit to honesty in your dealings, always!"

The future? "New products, of course! A few more Studios. A new approach to the consumer."