

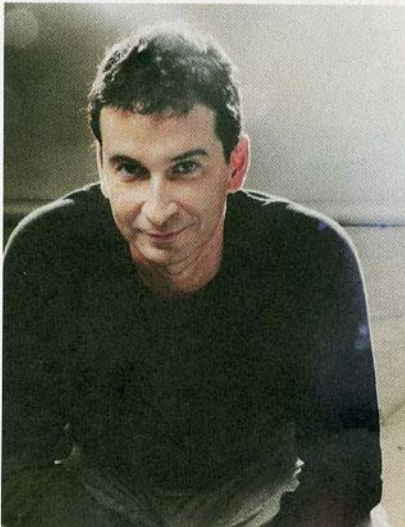


Fashion

THE TRANSFORMER

The internet revolutionised the fashion industry – we shop online in increasing numbers; catwalk shows can now be streamed live to all. But Federico Marchetti is in another category altogether. The Italian mastermind behind Yoox, the online retailer representing some of the biggest brands in international fashion – and more recently, art and design, too – explains where it all went so right

PROFILE BY REBECCA GONSALVES



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ABOVE: Federico Marchetti. OPPOSITE & FOLLOWING PAGE: Delfina Delettrez's exclusive Winter Garden collection for yoox.com

"I remember, when I was a teenager, wanting to save Africa," says Federico Marchetti, the founder and CEO of the Yoox Group at his company's headquarters in Milan. "A friend of mine told me that wildebeests belong to the buffalo family, so I thought with all the millions of wildebeests in Africa you could make buffalo mozzarella – imagine how many Africans could eat it. I was 18 when I came up with this theory, but then I realised they're called wildebeests for a reason – because they're wild and it would be impossible to milk them. So I just wasted a week with an idea." Marchetti also had the idea for a cameraphone back when mobiles were more like bricks, but sadly didn't have the engineering or technological nous to bring his idea to fruition.

Who knows what Marchetti's life could have been if such plans had come to fruition, but as head of the leading internet retail partner for fashion and design, he's not looking back in anger. Yoox Group began life in late 1999 and has grown into a vast network, not only of its own multi-brand stores – thecorner.com, bargain-hunters paradise yoox.com, its

footwear-focused sibling shoescribe.com – but also as the power behind e-tail sites for luxury brands including Dolce & Gabbana, Valentino and Marni. In 2012, the group reported net revenues of €376m, with the original site yoox.com being the most profitable of its projects.

Born in Ravenna, northern Italy in 1969, Marchetti knew from a young age that he wanted to be an entrepreneur, choosing to follow a traditional route into the business world: a degree in Economics was followed by an MBA from Columbia University. Upon graduation, Marchetti served as an advisor to various chief executives and designers in the fashion industry, while he worked on his plan for Yoox.

"I realised I wouldn't want to spend 10 years behind a desk to make, say, bread. Fashion was my passion, retail too, but not necessarily the industry – more the customer.

"I always liked fashion as a way of differentiation," he explains. "In a way, the opposite of fashion where everybody's wearing the same." Marchetti realised that people weren't only interested in what was 'in' that season, and that →





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all the designer clothes that don't get sold in end-of-season sales still had plenty of value. And so, Yoox was born in October 1999, when Marchetti began drafting his mission statement.

It's difficult to remember the fear that shrouded the internet pre-Millennium. In 1999, we were all mildly concerned that the Y2K bug would put paid to civilisation as we know it, internet speeds were snail-paced and businesses were generally reluctant to get caught in the net. But Marchetti could see the potential for businesses, indeed his mission statement reinforced that belief, stating: "Yoox will be the global internet retailing partner for the leading brands". While Marchetti is evidently a forward-thinker, much of his ideas are steeped in traditional ideals, too. "I'm obsessed about service," he says. "I really think that online you can achieve a great level of service, that in the physical stores you may not."

Being able to shop whenever, wherever and anonymously are huge bonuses to the online revolution says Marchetti, but he is quick to assert that there are some things that the internet cannot replace or replicate. "I read the fashion show will disappear, but I'm more moderate than that. A fashion show is a very efficient way of getting all the people together in one room - buyers, press - to do business. I totally believe the show will last forever because of that."

Marchetti's powers of prediction may be somewhat hit and miss, but he says his company was the first to offer the option to buy from the catwalk, that it began working on a mobile sales platform in 2006 - which now accounts for about 40 per cent of traffic to the site - and that it was one of the first luxury online retailers to break the Chinese market. "We launched our mobile channels on the same day the iPad was launched in the US. It's very important in our business to be the first, because if you are ... a follower, you are always too late, there is always a new wave."

As a member of Italian fashion's inner circle, Marchetti is quick to defend the slights that have been levied against his colleagues. For example, this season, the talk of a lack of young talent at Milan Fashion Week - dominated by established, wealthy houses - gained real volume. While Marchetti believes that innovations such as the Vogue Talent Corner show that the industry is addressing such issues, he also admits to finding similar problems when recruiting. "My biggest issue is finding Italian people - we're in a country that is internet unfriendly and one of the problems is that [Italians] cannot communicate.



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*We are not
 a magazine-
 shop. We are
 a retailer with
 great content*
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"When I started in 1999, I thought I was going to be a serial entrepreneur," says Marchetti, who soon realised that he was too much of a "romantic" to be able to sell the company he had worked so hard on, knowing its unfulfilled potential. "I will always be a builder, I prefer to put my ideas into one company rather than thinking about new ideas for other companies."

In August 2012, the fashion and lifestyle conglomerate Kering (then PPR) embarked on a joint-venture with Yoox in order to create online platforms for the brands in its luxury division, with chief executive François-Henri Pinault stating that his group had an ambition to increase online sales to €1bn over the next six years. "E-business is a strategic priority for the Group," said Pinault at the time.

While Yoox began as a straightforward retail site, it has grown into one with an increased editorial side, as has been demanded by the changing landscape of both traditional media and retailers. But Marchetti draws the line where others attempt to blur it ever further. "We are not a magazine-shop, and we don't want to be one. We are a retailer with great content." It has also gradually become more involved with one-off projects with brands, artists and designers. As an extension of the Yoox Art platform that launched in 2012 – with works by Grayson Perry and Damien Hirst – and to coincide with the Venice Biennale, last summer Marchetti attempted to bring the focus back to the work of young Venetian artists, with a project in Venice and online. "Our approach to the art scene has not been to get rid of the galleries and institutions, but to help them have more visibility, a new audience – a big audience of 40 million."

Such projects, in varying scale, span all of Yoox's multi-branded sites – from exclusive designs by Pierre Hardy for shoescribe.com to jewellery designer *du jour* Delfina Delettrez's Winter Garden collection being sold exclusively through yoox.com and accompanied by a short film. "I prefer to think of myself as an outsider rather than part of a new establishment," says Marchetti. "I was a good friend of Malcolm McLaren and he used to tell me you should remember the three S's – subversive, stylish and sexy – and that is what I try to do."

"Everything starts from the assumption that our customers are smart, fashion-savvy and intelligent – they don't need to be dictated what to wear. I still shop in stores, as well as on Yoox and TheCorner – so I'm the customer – and I don't want to be dictated to by anything" ●