International Journal of Business and General Management (IJBGM) ISSN(P): 2319-2267; ISSN(E): 2319-2275

Vol. 2, Issue 5, Nov 2013, 57-64

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A SHARED HISTORY FOR A SHARED PROJECT: USING STORYTELLING AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS TO LAUNCH A NEW PRODUCT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to investigate the role of collaborative relationships and the dynamics underlying value co-creation in the Italian wine industry; second, to explore the potentialities of storytelling as a mean to enhance the emotional connections between wine and consumers.

Design: We adopted a qualitative research approach, based on the deep analysis of the project carried out by three Italian wineries, involved together in the production of the first sparkling wine made with Aleatico grape. Semi-structured interviews with wineries' owners/managers and the oenologist who coordinated the project were conducted to gather in-depth information.

Findings: The paper underlines how three wineries, each located in a different region and with a specific tradition, can engage in collaborative relationships in order to achieve a shared objective. Furthermore, it describes a new approach to storytelling, aimed at creating an emotional bond with customers through a shared history, that evokes the history of the wineries' country of origin.

Practical Implications: In the highly fragmented Italian wine industry, mainly made up of small and medium wineries generally reluctant to engage collaborative relationships, the analyzed project suggests an alternative way of facing market challenges based on co-creating value without losing autonomy and individual identity of wines.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative Relationships, Experiential Marketing, Storytelling, Wine Marketing

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the way three Italian wineries worked together on an innovation project aimed at creating an emotional bond with their customers by leveraging on a shared history: the history of their country of origin. In the last decades, the importance of building and managing emotional connections between products and customers has been widely highlighted and differently conceptualized in management literature (Schmitt, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 2000; Gallucci, 2005; Carù and Cova, 2007). Therefore, most managers and business practitioners have started to think of products and brands in terms of experiences, making several efforts to affect senses and stimulate minds. This new way of looking at consumption marked the progression from traditional marketing to experiential marketing (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999, 2003), which had a major impact in the increasingly competitive wine business environment.

In its millennial tradition, indeed, wine has been much more than an alcoholic beverage and its consumption has gradually earned a wider meaning, going beyond organoleptic features and functional benefits. To several wine marketing segments, today drinking a good wine means living an experience made up of unique sensations and emotions, a kind of "journey" from the vineyard to the glass. In the expanding body of literature on wine consumer behavior, several authors have stressed the hedonistic and aesthetic components of consumption (Groves et al., 2000; Charters, 2006) as well as the

influence of emotional experiences on decision making processes and wine brand choice (Nowak et al., 2006; Orth and Kale, 2008; Orth et al., 2010). Most studies examined the issue of wine as an experience devoting their attention to hedonic and experiential consumption practices connected to wine tourism (Ali-Knight and Carlsen, 2003; Charters and Pettigrew, 2005; Bruwer and Alant, 2009). Meanwhile, wine cellar tours, tastings and vineyard discovery programs proliferated worldwide as effective tools to differentiate wineries' offers in the crowed wine market. Along with place-related elements, historical aspects referring to wine producers and product knowledge may hold the key for a successful positioning of products. As stated by Schmitt (1999), experiential marketing is eclectic and makes use of a wide range of tools in order to dazzle customers' senses, touch their hearts and stimulate their minds.

In recent years, storytelling has gained a growing interest in the field of management and the importance of connecting with customers on an emotional level through narratives has been widely highlighted by marketing academics (Gabriel, 2000; Fog et al., 2005; Patterson and Brown, 2005; Fontana et al., 2011). In their view, storytelling is not just an effective advertising tool but also represents a source of competitive advantage since it is able to create a kind of empathy that is not easily replicable by competitors. Therefore, storytelling deserves particular attention also in wine business, where emotional drivers of consumption are strictly linked to territory and wine producer's history. Furthermore, as noted by Groves et al. (2000) in their taxonomy of wine consumption practices, storytelling may be used by consumers as a way to enhance the perception that they are involved directly in the production, even not being engaged in the growing or harvesting of grapes. In spite of its importance for exploiting wine emotional heartland, there is still limited literature examining the role of storytelling in differentiating wineries' strategies.

As a matter of fact, in 2011 Italy celebrated the 150th anniversary of its unification and for such an important occasion Riccardo Cotarella – worldwide known oenologist and consultant for several national and foreign wineries – promoted an ambitious project, aiming at realizing the first sparkling wine made with Aleatico grape through the collaboration among three Italian wineries. Far from being the most known of Italian varieties, this red grape, with a strong character and a unique scent, appeared the best one to celebrate the country's unification due to its ability to acclimatize in the whole Italian territory, with peculiar flavors and aromas for each region. Accordingly, the wineries chosen by Cotarella to participate in the project were located in the regions crossed by Aleatico grape when it was brought to Italy by the Greeks: Apulia, Campania, Lazio and Tuscany.

Moreover, in order to celebrate the passion and the courage demonstrated by the unification process protagonists, the project – effectively named "Together for 150 years of Italy's unity" – presented a challenge in itself: to put together deeply different entrepreneurial entities with the specific purpose to valorize diversities and exploit synergies. The importance of building collaborative relationships in order to integrate complementary resources and competencies and co-create value within larger and more complex competitive systems has been largely emphasized by management scholars (among the others: Normann and Ramirez, 1993; Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1995; Burton, 1995). Nevertheless, Italian wine industry is still characterized by a highly fragmented competitive structure, with a great number of small wineries traditionally isolated from each other (Mattiacci and Maralli, 2007).

Based on this, the proposed case study offers unique insights on the strategic efforts required to the wineries in order to compete successfully in a challenging and complex business environment.

METHOD

The present study has a qualitative nature and is based on the in-depth analysis of the "Together for 150 years of Italy's unity" project and the wineries it involved. These wineries are deeply different from each other in terms of size,

location and manufacturing tradition. The participation to a shared project, aiming at realizing significant innovations both on corporate image and product portfolio, made of these three companies an interesting object of investigation in order to explore the above-mentioned issues. Therefore, a case studies research was realized using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the oenologist who coordinated the whole project and with the wineries' owners/managers. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Additional information were collected through secondary sources, such as corporate websites, press releases, institutional presentations and so on.

The wineries initially involved in the project were three, located in Apulia, Campania and Lazio. A brief description of these companies is presented in the Table 1. However, it is worth to note that in 2013 another winery from Tuscany will join them, with a product named "Bixio".

Name	Region	Year of Foundation	Bottles Per Year	Best Known Brands
Falesco	Lazio/Umbria	1979	3 MIO	Montiano
La Guardiense	Campania	1960	3 MIO (plus bulk wine)	Janare
Leone De Castris	Apulia	1665	2.5 MIO	Five Roses

Table 1: The Three Italian Wineries Involved in the Project

Although it is the youngest of the three wineries involved in the project, Falesco has an outstanding heritage of winemaking tradition, based on a perfect balance between passion and science of wine. Founded by the brothers Riccardo and Renzo Cotarella, in less than a decade the winery realized significant advances, bringing a renewed prestige to the ancient vines of the area between Lazio and Umbria, which had been unjustly forgotten. The constant attention to research and development activities enabled this family business — that meantime had created a new winery in the Umbria region — to realize continuous improvements in winegrowing and winemaking, reflected in a broad portfolio of high quality wines that are appreciated both on domestic and foreign markets.

The Farming Cooperative La Guardiense, with 1,000 partners and more than 240,000 hl produced annually, is among the biggest wineries in Italy. Inspired by the continuous research of a blend between tradition and innovation, in its five decades La Guardiense has made significant steps forward, moving from a mass production to an effective offer system able to satisfy different market segments, made up of three wine lines and a wide range of sparkling wines produced both with charmat and classic method.

A clear witness of this strategic renewal is represented by the Janare project, aimed to protect and valorize autochthonous vineyards – such as Falanghina and Aglianico – through the production of premium wines that have already obtained several prestigious recognitions.

Leone De Castris is one of the most ancient wineries in Italy and its famous Five Roses was the first rosé wine bottled and sold in Italy. The company used its age-old tradition in wine-making to protect autochthonous vineyards and spread their unique characteristics also on foreign market, that today accounts for the half of its sales. Aware of the role it has always played in the local economy, the winery is focused on the production of regional products, often awarded with important recognitions and also distributed in several foreign countries. The Museum dedicated to the company's history represents the starting point of the frequent cellar tours and tastings aimed to enhance customer experience in a familiar and historical atmosphere.

KEY FINDINGS

The alternative development path we decided to focus on represents the perfect expression of the linkage existing

between wine and territory: three sparkling wines, made with the same grape and a shared technology, each of one reflecting the soil, climate and other unique aspects of growing regions. What clearly emerged analyzing the profile of the three wineries is the strong bond existing between the wine and the territory. The wine they produce, indeed, is not the mere result of a wine-making process, but is also aimed to express the unique characteristics of the land from which it was born. Therefore, despite the differences existing in terms of geographical location, size and wine-making tradition, the three actors of the project shared the idea of how to build the identity of a wine, that in their view goes beyond the grape variety or the adopted technology, but at the same time is strongly influenced by the people working in the vineyards. Grape, people and territory: in the words of the project coordinator, the mutual influence of these essential elements determines the unique alchemy that makes of wine consumption a memorable experience. Based on this assumption, the project "Together for 150 years of Italy's unity" was planned with the specific purpose of emphasizing the different flavors and aromas that a wine, even if made with the same grape, is able to express due to the diversity of the growing region. Thus, the same grape, Aleatico, was used by three wineries located in different Italian regions (Lazio, Campania and Apulia) to produce three rosé sparkling wines: *Anita, Teano* and *I Mille*.

In a marketing perspective, the choice to use Italian history in order to build an easily recognizable identity for the project and the deriving products can be seen as a particular tool of narrative marketing (Fontana et al., 2011). In this case, in fact, instead of creating a plot for making a product or a brand memorable (Fog et al., 2005), storytelling makes use of a narrative that is part of shared knowledge in the national context, thus speaking directly to customers' emotional and affective sphere. Furthermore, a kind of analogy was created between the protagonists of the unification process, whose courage and passion were crucial for the achievement of a so difficult objective, and the wine-makers, that also need courage and passion to face the difficulties related to climate excesses and changing industry trends.

Anita is the name chosen by Falesco for its rosé sparkling wine, produced with Aleatico grapes cultivated in the amazing hills overlooking Bolsena Lake. This name is a clear tribute to the devoted wife of Giuseppe Garibaldi, national hero among the fathers of Italy's unification.

Coherently with the respect for tradition characterizing its activity, La Guardiense participated to the project in order to restore Aleatico, that even being a typical vineyard had been forgotten for years. The result was a fresh and joyful rosé sparkling wine named *Teano*, like the place in Campania region – around 50 km from the winery – where Giuseppe Garibaldi and the King Victor Emanuel II met to sign the unification of the South with the Kingdom of Sardinia.

I Mille was produced by Leone de Castris with Aleatico grapes grown in a vineyard located in the gently rolling plain of Salice Salentino. Thanks to the proximity both to the Ionic and Adriatic sea coasts, the land has climatic conditions that give a unique aroma to this rosé sparkling wine, whose name was inspired by the ambitious Expedition of the Thousand, led in 1860 by Garibaldi in order to conquer the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

According to Riccardo Cotarella, who planned and coordinated the project, the heterogeneity of the involved actors was at the same time a big challenge and a key success factor. Indeed, a modern family-owned winery, a big farming cooperative and a familiar winery with an age-old tradition represent three completely different entrepreneurial entities in the Italian wine industry. Nevertheless, since the beginning the involved managers demonstrated a great passion as well as a remarkable openness to innovation and change. This is quite normal for a modern and market-oriented winery like Falesco, though the scenario does not offer many chances to collaborate in such an innovative way. On the contrary, being part of this project was a big challenge for the Cooperative La Guardiense, whose management board revealed a great capability in overcoming difficulties mainly related to its size and, thanks to a growing attention to market needs and

quality, was able to «make an elephant move like a gazelle», as Cotarella said. Likewise, more than 350 years of history did not prevent Leone de Castris owners to look towards future with the enthusiasm and the courage necessary to live the safe harbor and innovate.

As stated earlier, the project is the result of a high coordination both on the technical and marketing side. Regarding the first aspect, a central role has been played by the project coordinator supported by the oenologists of each winery, who shared a common winemaking technology. For marketing activities, a coordinated work was carried out by the three wineries' top managers and communication staff. More specifically, a significant effort was made to create a coordinated image for the three products, which were packaged in the same bottle and had the same label indicating, along with the name of each wine and its features, the producer's name and the title of the project, enriched by a small Italian flag. The overall campaign revolved around this important page in the history of the country and its protagonists, whose passion and dedication were also used to build and communicate the personality of the three sparkling wines.

The main communication activities included traditional advertising and massive use of public relations. Advertising through brochures and specialized press was focused on telling the history of the three sparkling wines and their producers using the frame of 150th anniversary of Italy's unification. The emotional involvement of the consumers is the central core of the several events and tastings also organized by the wineries for presenting their Aleatico sparkling wines. It seems interesting to note that part of such events, coherently with the history that inspired the project, were organized and promoted together in the same places that the names of the wines evocated: for instance, one of the first presentations of the project took place in Teano, the town where the unification of Italy formally originated. Therefore, the three wineries also demonstrated to know that instead of simply telling customers effective stories about wine, it is necessary to find a way to make them live those stories, feel the values they contain, and find the origins of a wine in the flavors and aromas of the territory that gave birth to it.

This persuasion clearly emerged in the philosophy of project coordinator, who stated that «a wine without identity has no future [...]. If wine – and before grape – does not contain the signs and moods of the land that gave birth to it, it means there is no link between those plates and the vineyard. That is to say they are unrelated and incompatible».

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Even considering the limitations of this study, mainly due to its qualitative and explorative nature, it offers wine managers and practitioners interesting insights on how to operate in an innovative and collaborative way in order to gain customer attention and preference. As widely highlighted, significant efforts were made to coordinate and integrate the marketing activities of the three wineries involved in a shared project, aiming at simultaneously creating the identity of each product and communicating the historical and emotional aspects related to the overall project. Therefore, a particular way of telling the project was found: its story, in fact, was strictly connected with the history of Italy's unification process, by giving to each sparkling wine the name of a protagonist or a place of crucial importance to the *Risorgimento*. This peculiar approach to storytelling was certainly one of the key elements of this ambitious project, that represented a successful attempt to break the rules traditionally dominating the highly fragmented Italian wine industry.

Furthermore, by working as a group to realize an absolute innovation in the wine industry, the three wineries were able to acquire complementary capabilities, thus giving birth to a value co-creation system aimed at collaborating for the achievement of a shared advantage rather than fighting to search an individual success. Important synergies were realized among the value co-creators, whose joint efforts produced a heritage of knowledge and experiences significantly higher than the one that could be produced by the efforts of the same actors alone.

In the Italian wine industry, mainly made up of small and medium wineries generally reluctant to engage in collaborative relationships, the analyzed project appears as a case of particular interest, since it suggests an alternative way of facing market challenges based on co-creating value without losing autonomy and individual identity of wines.

As stated by the coordinator and shared by the managers, this project represented just the «first piece of a mosaic» that will need further exploration. Other plans, indeed, were already arranged – involving more than other twenty companies – in order to achieve even more ambitious objectives related to product innovation.

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