Fashion's Mr. Nice Guy

Offering free lunches and beautiful surroundings to his employees and almost anything to his customers, Brunello Cucinelli has proved that nice guys do get ahead.

SOLOMEO, Italy — Brunello Cucinelli is going to ruin it for all the other manufacturers.

In fact, some retailers might consider dealing with Cucinelli, founder of a cashmere knit empire, something of a dream: he has no minimum orders, he'll ship a reorder of even a single sweater overnight — at no extra cost — he ships at landed cost, and a religious about on-time deliveries.

"I’m a conservative and come from the land of saints and monks," said Cucinelli, who founded the company in 1984 here in the idyllic hills of Umbria, near the town of Assisi, home to Saint Francis. "I believe that a company has to run smoothly and in perfect harmony."

Cucinelli built his business, which reeled in sales of $88 million (67 billion lire) last year, around a luxury product and coddling his retail clients.

"The fundamental principle is that the client comes before profit," added the bright-eyed Cucinelli. "When I adopted this theory in the Eighties, I was going against mainstream because back then, most companies were more concerned about the profit.

"The idea is to coddle the client by offering a super-efficient service. When it comes to culture and art, I feel very Italian. But when it comes to precision, I feel very German," said Cucinelli.

True to his word, if an American store needs only one sweater on a consumer’s request, Cucinelli insures that it is shipped overnight — "Obviously, at the same price," he said. "To be able to do this you have to be devoted to your clients." He disdains minimum orders because he finds them insulting to the client: "I hate imposing, and in any case, it’s more palatable for a client to know he can buy only 20 sweaters. He’s more inclined to dare.

The good will starts at home. First, he invested $8.5 million (55 billion lire) to restructure part of this village, which has a population of 350, and renovate a medieval castle, outfitting it with high tech looms. The castle serves as the company’s headquarters.

"I’m a big admirer of the Roman Emperor Adrian, who felt responsible for the beauties of the world. I love art, and I wanted to give my contribution," said Cucinelli.

Wrapped in a cloister-like silence and with views of the gentle countryside, the Cucinelli offices exude tranquility even during the most frenzied working periods. If it weren’t for the snappy, up-to-date product, hanging from modern looms, taking a trip here is like stepping back in time.

"I believe that to be able to give the maximum to your clients, you must train your staff to be devoted to them. It’s important to create a nice environment. It helps them work better," said Cucinelli. The headquarters is outfitted with a kindergarten, a giant house and a small restaurant with stone and wooden walls, where employees eat a free lunch.

Because of these business philosophies, both internal and external, the company was the subject of a study at Università Bocconi, one of Italy’s prime economics universities.

Currently, Cucinelli has 1,200 salespoints worldwide. In the U.S., which accounts for 10 percent of volume, the line is carried by Bergdorf Goodman, Neiman Marcus, Barney’s New York, Ultimo and Wilkes Bashford. Italy and Germany are Cucinelli’s strongest markets, each accounting for 28 percent of the business.

"Germany is a strong market because of the cold weather," noted Cucinelli.

Cucinelli produces 350,000 sweaters a year and has been dubbed the "Benetton of cashmere," owing to a wide variety of colors and styles. He lumped into cashmere because he felt he could diversify traditional classic and manahal styles for women.

"In the early Eighties, cashmere sweaters were considered men’s wear, so I experimented with color and funky shapes," said Cucinelli. The highlight of each season’s collection is a 50-color palette.

"To narrow it down to 50 choices, we experiment with 500 colors," said Cucinelli, boasting of an archive with 3,000 colors.

Silhouettes include body-caressing T-shirts, long tunics, cozy ribbed turtlenecks, delicate twinsets, jogging suits and saucy micro sweaters in stretch cashmere.

All the sample collections are produced in the Cucinelli headquarters. The main commercial production is done in local speciality factories. Cucinelli supplies the yarn, which is woven, cut and sewn in the shops. But for final inspection before they are shipped, the sweaters all make a trip back through the castle.

— Alessandra Ilari