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Italian entrepreneur Cucinelli: we need a Leonardo against connectivity sickness

INTERVIEW By Luca Ubaldeschi, PAGE 14

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

“We need a new Leonardo against connectivity sickness”

The only Italian guest at the event: I try to be a web humanist

The differences between a mediaeval village in Umbria and the capital of America’s hi-tech industry are perhaps fewer than one would think, to judge by the fact Silicon Valley decided to contact Solomeo and ask Brunello Cucinelli to fly over to San Francisco. Objective: to give a lesson on how to make the web more human. This is happening today, at Dreamforce, one of the main forums for innovation. Cucinelli – the “cashmere king” and paladin of globally successful Made in Italy - is the only Italian amongst the main speakers, who include Michelle Obama and Bush’s daughters, the CEOs of YouTube, Ibm and Adidas, but also star system names like Natalie Portman, Ashton Kutcher and rapper William. Cucinelli will expound his “humanistic capitalism” philosophy and invite people who’ve made the web their life’s purpose to be less slave to technology.

Mr Cucinelli, aren’t you afraid of being jeered at?

“Not at all. After all, if they invited me, it’s because they too feel a need to humanize the web. We’re always connected. Always. And it’s not a good thing”.

But you’ll be speaking to an audience of hundreds of people who do business and get rich with connectivity. Why should they listen to you?

Because I’m not advising them to go against their own interests but to establish rules for governing technology better. This is necessary because otherwise, in the long run, people will rebel.”

Do you see technology as an enemy?

Not at all. I consider it a gift of God and I obviously use it in my company. But to Marc Benioff, the organizer of Dreamforce, I said this: you heroes of the digital era are modern day Leonardo da Vincis, but the true genius will be the one who finds the formula for healthier use of the web, to overcome the malaise caused by being always connected.

Is this a physical sort of malaise?

“No, I’m referring to people’s spirit. Man has always had this *mal de vivre*; it stems from worry, health, work, family matters. But 15 years ago it wasn’t so bad. It’s now being exacerbated by the digital noise of permanent connection. It’s no coincidence that anxiolytics sales have risen so

much. Don't you see more and more people who are already tired in the morning? People who fret if they don't get a reply to their emails in 30 seconds? Who walk around head down looking into a screen? Saint Augustine has already said it all: "Lift your eyes to the sky and life will seem simpler". We've lowered the quality of our lives. The dictatorship of being connected steals time away from our spirit. And in my company I don't want to rob the people who work in it of their spirit".

What countermeasures have you taken?

We've discussed the matter in meetings and adopted some rules. For example, reducing multiple emails, as far as possible, and using the phone instead of an email where possible. With a few seconds of conversation you can easily explain yourself, and what's more, you hear the other person's voice and understand how they are. Mobile phones have to be muted in meetings and we've set limits on the frequency with which we make e-commerce contacts with customers, to avoid seeming intrusive. It was like a millennium change for us, our attempt to be web humanists.

But your business sells all over the world, a world that's increasingly connected and fast moving. Can you reconcile this with your rhythms?

Not only do our offices close at 17.30 but I also ask my employees not to be connected from then on. In Tokyo as in New York they know our working hours, when they can speak to us. Why should you send me an email at 5.30 in the morning? Wait till 8 and I'll answer. Believe me: there are no problems that can't wait a few hours.

Aren't you afraid of becoming less competitive like this?

No. Our results are showing growth, we're considered an efficient company. We're not risking anything. On the contrary. Too much connection does not generate creativity. How can I concentrate on being creative if I have to answer 300 emails a day? We must focus on quality, that's the challenge.

To obtain what?

Humanity has always been searching for something. In this epoch it's probably silence, peace. The real luxury in the future will be managing to lead a life that's a secret to our travelling companion, the phone.

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Photo: Humanistic capitalism

Brunello Cucinelli, the “cashmere king” and one of the paladins of Made in Italy worldwide, will be talking about “gentle technology” at Dreamforce today.