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1stdibs founder Michael Bruno dishes on antique chic

The realtor-turned-dot-com-entrepreneur dishes on growing the antique marketplace online
By Sarah Rufca | April 19, 2013 | Updated: April 20, 2013 4:06pm

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Michael Bruno, the founder and chairman of 1stdibs.com, will be speaking about the world of online luxury in Houston on Wednesday as part of the 2013 Lawndale Design Fair.
Photo: Andrew French

In 2001, successful realtor **Michael Bruno** moved from the Internet boomtown of San Francisco to Old World Paris, where he first had the idea to put the amazing antiques at the famed Cligancourt flea market online for Americans to buy.

By 2012, his website, **1stdibs.com**, had logged \$650 million in sales for 1,500 international dealers of antiques, fine art and vintage furniture, jewelry and more, with Houston shops including **Carl Moore Antiques**, Metro Retro Furniture and Found for the Home, among others, selling their wares on the site.

"People are always curious about the magical mystery tour that was launching 1stdibs," says Bruno. "It's kind of a fun story; my background had nothing to do with e-commerce - I had just gotten e-

mail - but I wanted to get into the dot-com world, so I thought, "Why not?"

Now with spring design fairs heating up in Houston, we asked Bruno about the booming e-commerce design world, and for his take on Texas.

Q: How did you make the transition from Internet novice to online entrepreneur?

A: I didn't think about it too much. If I did I would have thought about all the things that go wrong and I wouldn't have done it. That's what stops a lot of people: They have an idea, but they think things through too much and never get around to starting it. That's why I moved to Paris (before launching 1stdibs) - it was a completely new environment and something new to do. After my first trip to the flea market, I thought people really would love to shop for the same things online. At the time, decorators were only making it to Paris once a year and things move so fast at the market I thought people would like to see new things once a week instead. It turns out I was right.

Q: Before 1stdibs, it seemed in some ways the antiques market hadn't really changed much in decades, from the flea markets to the auction houses. How did you convince dealers to change the way they do business?

A: When we first started out, we thought, "Let's make tools to search for things so its easy to see it in person before buying it." We really weren't sure people would buy things online, so we had button, to call the dealer as

well as a click to buy button and we let them decide what's best for them.

After Paris, the next market we went to was the Hamptons, as a test for New York, since the designers would be there all summer working on projects. Many of them didn't even have computers in their stores at the time; it was a whole new concept for them, but they decided to go for it. It seemed like times were changing already, we had the Paris flea market online, so why not the Hamptons? After we expanded to New York we planned to go to Dallas and Houston very quickly after the West Coast, but we ended up adding New Orleans first because a friend had us for a visit to show us the antique stores. This was in 2004, and after Katrina hit the next year, the only business some shops had for two years was online. Some of them said they would have gone out of business had it not been for us.

Q: Do you think the experience of shopping for antiques and vintage goods online is different than in person?

A: It's actually easier when I buy stuff online. I get better information because I read about the items, I get dimensions, I look at images of the condition. When I walk in a store I get excited and I get caught up in that feeling. When I shop online I end up with more precisely what I need than I do in a store.

You can go to any room in your home, use a tape measure to get dimensions and see coffee tables on 1stdibs in every shape and size, things you've never even imagined. It helps people create their own unique environment. I bought a center table recently because I finally decided to be clever and look for the right size. Once I searched, I had a preconceived idea I would find something antique but ended up with something totally different, a **Jean-Michel Frank** table, and it changed my whole house.

It's great to search by price high to low because you get educated in the process of what you get for \$50,000 or \$40,000, and when you get down to what you can really spend you can see that maybe you can afford something for \$5,000 that really isn't that different than what's available for \$10,000.

Q: Houston is the seventh largest source of traffic to 1stdibs. Would you say Texans have a unique style?

A: The best! I think the taste level is very high. Texans know what's good, they know that they want the best, and they aren't afraid to pay for it.

Q: How do you see the online market continuing to grow?

A: We recently entered new European markets. We added Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium, and we're getting ready to add Germany and Scandinavia. It's all about building traffic globally and consolidating shipping because people don't hesitate to ship their finds from Europe or Mexico so we want to make that more efficient.

Q: What trends are you seeing in vintage furniture right now?

A: It's hard to nail that down - at the moment we're seeing an influx of new types of inventory. So much European is online already that I've been surprised at the caliber of new and unusual things we've never seen before. If anything it's swinging more back in direction of classical antiques, clean lines go really well with modern sensibilities.

1stdibs has been ahead of the curve because the trend (right now) in general is vintage. It has become so popular in so many ways, collecting it has become bigger all over. To me, that's normal. But for others it's a trend.

Q: Now that you are listing homes on 1stdibs, do you feel like you've come full circle from your start in real estate?

A: It's like candy on the site. It probably was related to my love of real estate, but we think that showcasing great properties helps find potential buyers that didn't know they were even in the market. Chances are you didn't come to the website for a house, but you saw a house that interested you. It's finding buyers out of thin air. You never know what can prompt someone to say "Let's do it!" - and no one is more supportive of buying new houses than decorators.

Here's a sampling of Houston vendors' wares on 1stdibs.com:

19th-century Italian Rococo sofa, \$19,500, from Antiques of River Oaks, 3461 W. Alabama, 713-961-3333.

French porcelain pastille incense burner of head of an Egyptian pharaoh, circa 1880, \$462, from Carl Moore Antiques, 1610 Bissonnet, 713-524-2502.

French gilt wood and enamel clock, \$2,895, from Kay O'Toole Antiques and Eccentricities, 1921 Westheimer, 713-523-1921.

Leather and chrome swivel chair, \$1,400, from Metro Retro Furniture, 2215 Washington, 713-521-3030.

French iron chandelier, circa 1935, \$19,750, from W. Gardner, Ltd., 2930 Ferndale, 713-521-1027.