



Coordinating the Italian Presence as a System

i-Italy Team (May 25, 2017)



"We promote Italian art, cinema, food and wine and other made in Italy products, while also showing tourism opportunities and teaching the audience about our achievements in science, manufacturing, and research. This is what we call a 'country-system approach.'. Interview with Consul General of Los Angeles, Antonio Verde.

Consul General [Antonio Verde](#) [2]'s jurisdiction stretches from Southern California to Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico. His constituency encompasses over 200,000 people who, in one way or another, claim Italian identity. A little over 20,000 are Italian citizens residing in the US. The rest are American citizens of Italian origin.

Your "public" is American, naturally. But that broad category includes, among others, two important and rather different groups: Italians residing in the US and Italian Americans. Can you give us a snapshot of your constituents from your point of view?

By now the Italian-American community is firmly integrated into American society, even if it preserves its past identity through consolidated national organizations, such as [NIAF](#) [3] and the [Order of Sons of Italy](#) [4], as well as a number of local associations that have now been federated.



As the original nucleus of Italian immigrants grows older, these organizations face considerable challenges trying to engage the next generation, including those coming from Italy today. An important role in coordinating the different components and generations of the Italian community is performed by the ComItEs, the elected representative organs for Italians abroad.

Yet, young people do differ socially and professionally from the original immigrants: they're professionals, entrepreneurs, and college professors; in LA many work in the entertainment world and in the fashion and design industry.

There are also Italians and Italian Americans who work in less glamorous but highly renowned industries, like aerospace and renewable energy. This generational gap is true of all young people, whether born here or in Italy.

You're saying that contemporary Italian Americans aren't so different from their Italian—or American for that matter—peers. So "Italian America" is no longer a community frozen in time?

Frozen isn't its dominant characteristic. That perception has largely dissolved. It was true before communication became so highly developed. But today many descendants of Italians have rekindled their relationship to their ancestral home and maintain ties that they couldn't have before. They visit Italy frequently and know what today's Italy is like.

Are there still a lot of Italian stereotypes— great lovers, hotheads, Mafiosi—that some blame Hollywood for perpetuating? Being in Los Angeles, I have to ask—This might have been the case in the past. But that's less relevant today. There's a clearer perception that these are works of fiction. And more importantly, Italy's image in the US is cool now.

Would you say the same for the image of Italian Americans?

The image of Italian Americans on both sides of the Atlantic has evolved and improved dramatically through time and most stereotypes have disappeared. Nowadays, Italian Americans are perfectly integrated into the professional world here and don't suffer bias.

Tell me about your role in Made in Italy. You're involved in promoting Italian quality and protecting Italian labels from the so-called "Italian sounding" phenomenon.

This is a very important issue and our Government is very active in protecting our points of excellence, particularly in the agricultural sector. Here too we have to draw a distinction. On the one hand, there are locally made knockoffs that market themselves by sounding Italian but are pale imitations. We need to ensure that consumers appreciate the difference of quality between Parmigiano and parmesan, to make just one example. On the other hand there are goods that are produced here because they're perishable; these are often made using Italian manufacturing methods and know-how and, sometimes, raw materials imported from Italy. They're not scams. But it's still important to underscore the difference.

We'd like to end on the following point: coordinating promotional efforts for Italy. How do you see this aspect from your vantage in Los Angeles?

Here in LA we have the representatives of the whole network of institutions that constitute the "Sistema Italia," which includes the Italian Cultural Institute (ICI), the Italian Trade Agency (ICE), the Government Tourist Board (ENIT), and the Italia-America Chamber of Commerce (IACCW). Promoting Italy abroad is this system's common goal and it's the job of Consulate General to coordinate the various parts. We do this through a series of integrated initiatives, for instance, where we promote Italian art, cinema, food and wine and other made in Italy products, while also showing tourism opportunities and teaching the audience about our achievements in science, manufacturing, and research. This is what we call a "country-system approach." Coordination and communications are, in short, linchpins. Nowadays success is predicated on having an effective communications strategy.

Then there's that typical Italian individualism. Is that a serious weakness?



It can be a positive cultural trait when it gives center stage to initiative, creativity and vision. This is at the heart of Italian entrepreneurship and is reflected by the success that our companies enjoy worldwide and in the US.

You think positively and refuse to see things in black-and-white terms. Would you call yourself an optimist?

I tend to see the half glass full more often than half empty, to use a common expression. But I wouldn't call it optimism. I think there's an element of realism involved in seizing upon opportunities even when faced with challenges. Maybe it's also a professional bent. I am not expected to see things negatively. We diplomats vie to unravel knots. And I really love this job.

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