



BUSINESS OBSERVER

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## Bright Lights

Area executive Fabio Zaniboni speaks four languages. He's also becoming fluent in the language of managing fast growth.

by: [Brian Hartz](#) Tampa Bay Editor

Clearwater-based Zaniboni Lighting Co. started as an offshoot of Cantalupi USA, a leading producer of lighting products for the super-yacht industry. With a nearly 85% market share, Cantalupi entrusted one of its top executives, Fabio Zaniboni, with the mission to branch out into hospitality and architectural services.

The results have been spectacular. The new company more than doubled revenue from 2015 to 2016, jumping 192%, from \$1.3 million to \$3.8 million, and has grown to 60 employees. Its products are sold to clients across the United States, Canada, Germany, Russia and even Dubai.

Founded in 2015, Zaniboni Lighting also acquired a second building next to its downtown Clearwater base to use as a manufacturing and shipping facility for its high-end LED light fixtures. And it's already running out of space there — “a good problem to have,” says Zaniboni, who adds that the company is in the process of completely revamping its Garden Street headquarters, which until the 1960s had been the Clearwater fire station. During the ensuing years, the building's historic brick walls, wooden beams and hardwood floors were covered up by generic office building trappings. Now workers are in the process of stripping away the carpet, drywall and cement - and, yes, installing a pole in tribute to the building's pedigree.

The exterior changes are emblematic of the way Zaniboni Lighting is evolving as a business. Having delivered lighting for such high-profile clients as the Porsche Tower in Miami and the 2017 Academy Awards (it supplied the lighting for the awards show's green room), the company is thinking big — and beyond the super-yacht industry. Zaniboni, who serves as president, and CEO Chiara Zaniboni, his wife, believe the company can surpass \$100 million, even \$200 million, in annual sales in the near-term.

A core challenge to reach that bold goal is dealing with a rapidly changing industry. “You can't do a market analysis and think that market analysis will last more than a year or two,” Zaniboni says. “After two years, it's going to be obsolete. The market is changing so fast. Change needs to be built into your procedures and strategies. “

Tall and stylish, Fabio Zaniboni was born in Italy and moved to France at age 2. His family also spent 10 years in South America during his formative years. He speaks fluent English, Spanish, French and Italian, and his resume includes a master's degree in engineering, a commission as an officer in the Italian military and a stint as a sales and marketing executive in the robotics division of Italian automaker Fiat. The Fiat gig took him to Detroit in the 1990s. It was during that time he met Bruno Cantalupi, founder of Cantalupi Lighting. Zaniboni helped Cantalupi open its first U.S. office, but eventually grew restless and wanted to strike out on his own.

“I got to a point where there was very little left that I could do as an executive,” he says, “and I'd always really wanted to have my own company, and to be able to bring into existence something that I'd dreamed of.”

Despite his background in highly structured environments like Fiat and the Italian military, Zaniboni runs the company with a laissez-faire approach. He prefers team members solve problems on their own and seek out ways to improve and streamline processes when there's a lull in whatever their main job entails, whether it's designing new components, operating lathes and saws or packaging and shipping products.

"It needs to be fun to come to work," he says. "Until 15, 20 years ago, people would go to work just because they needed to. Now, everything is so fluid and you need to have collaboration — you can't just have yes-people who blindly follow orders."

Zaniboni Lighting has recruited workers from Detroit, Dallas, and even much farther afield: Albania.

"We started with one Albanian person," Zaniboni says, "and then he said, 'Would you mind if I asked my brother to come in?' And now we have about 15 Albanians. People come here from overseas and they like where they work and how they get treated, so we're getting more and more referrals. It's very important how you treat people, especially when you consider that your pool of talent is not necessarily Clearwater. Your pool of talent, if you want to do something different, needs to be at least nationwide."

Zaniboni says he learned that lesson the hard way when he lost a prized employee to Silicon Valley.

"About three or four years ago, my best salesperson, she quit. I asked, 'Where are you going?' 'To Google,' she said. So she's going from Clearwater, Florida, to the Bay Area. That was a shocking wake-up call for me. I realized I really needed to build something special, because I'm no longer competing for talent in my little town — I'm competing for good talent across the nation. And we work a lot with Google, with Uber, all these cool companies, we contribute to their lighting design. So I know how they think; I know how they behave. And what we are trying to create here is that kind of attraction and pull for talent."

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