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PERFECT COMPANY
Solari di Udine

SIGNS OF THE TIMES —Udine

Preface

You may not know its name but chances are you use its designs every week. Italian company Solari revolutionised train and airport information boards in the 1950s and continues to innovate with LCD-screen and punch-card technology.

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For Italian company Solari, getting noticed has never been much of a problem. Every day millions of hurried travellers at places such as Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport and Penn Station in New York look for one of its signature products: smartly designed information boards that help people get from A to B.

Despite its products being scrutinised by the public at over 2,000 transport hubs, the company doesn't enjoy the name recognition of other big brands. But seeking the spotlight has never been on its agenda. "We still consider ourselves very much an artisanal producer," says Katia Bredeon, Solari's marketing manager. "Besides, we think the information we display should come first."

Based in Udine, in northeastern Italy, the firm traces its origins to 1725. Company lore talks of a Genoese pirate named Solari who, on the run from Venetian forces, settled in Pesariis, a mountain village near Udine. There he devoted himself to making timepieces, picking up tips on the craft from contacts with Black Forest clockmakers.

Not long after, Fratelli Solari began to churn out clocks for bell towers, supplying them to towns around Venice. By the First World War, the workshop's clocks adorned squares around Italy and abroad. Being family run, however, the company also suffered from internal squabbling.



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- 01 Carlo Concina, director of production
- 02 Solari president Massimo Paniccia holds a Cifra 3 clock
- 03 Silk-screen flaps in Roman and Arabic
- 04 Technician tests an LED motorway sign
- 05 Marketing manager Katia Bredeon
- 06 Ticket machines for SNCF
- 07 Display at Charles de Gaulle airport

Two brothers, Remigio and Fermo Solari, who were eager to innovate, broke with their cousins. They sold their stake in the business and moved to Udine in 1948 to set up a rival operation, somewhat confusingly also called Solari. The move paid off as Remigio, a self-taught engineer, soon made a breakthrough that heralded a revolution in signage: the "flap display".

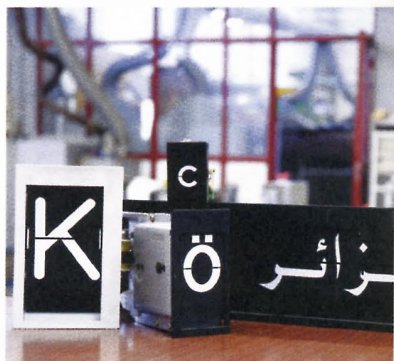
Remigio's design used alphanumeric characters and text silk-screened on to small metal flaps (later a special plastic). They were fitted on a Rolodex-style wheel and mounted inside a display. Each wheel contained up to 40 flaps and text could be changed via a typewriter-like device.

Introduced in 1956, the new system was a hit and was soon installed in hundreds of rail and air terminals. It won praise for its legibility thanks to crisp white lettering on a black background and the fact passengers could read the board even from a very acute angle. Customers loved its durability. "We have some models that are still going after 40 years," says Bredeon.

The Solari display's ingenious flipper board fitted perfectly with the glamorous era of jet travel, when stewardesses wore pillbox hats and airport lounges focused on service. Watching the flaps twirl to reveal the latest arrivals and departures news kept passengers entertained while they waited out delays. "It's emblematic



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Signal changes

- 1725** Fratelli Solari is founded in the village of Pesariis in Italy's northeast region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Begins making clocks for bell towers.
- 1948** Squabbles within family business push brothers Remigio and Fermo to relocate to Udine to open new firm developing clocks and information displays for stations and airports.
- 1956** Solari's flap display installed at Liège-Guillemins station in Belgium. Becomes industry standard.
- 1967** Tyre manufacturer Pirelli buys company, the first of several unsuccessful takeovers.
- 1994** Roman financier Massimo Paniccia takes over Solari.
- 1998** Rejuvenated Solari buys out Fratelli Solari, itself now in financial trouble after seeing its clock business steadily decline.
- 2004** A Solari board makes its big-screen debut in Steven Spielberg's film *The Terminal* when the studio asks the firm to make a bespoke display.
- 2007** Company wins contract to supply TFT-LCD displays inside carriages of high-speed Thalys trains.



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of all our products, as it combines technology with good design," says Bredeon.

After Remigio's death in 1957, Fermo pushed ahead with a line of clocks, the Cifra series. Designed by architect Gino Valle, these incorporated the flap display. Solari continued to innovate, making timcard machines for factories.

While prospects appeared good, the fact that neither Solari brother had any heirs led to the purchase of the company by tyre-maker Pirelli in 1967. This kicked off

a series of ill-advised takeovers, which left it without R&D money.

By the early 1990s Solari was teetering on bankruptcy. A fortuitous visit by a Roman financier, however, changed everything. "I was taken aback by what I saw," says Massimo Paniccia, who today serves as Solari president. "Here was such an important marque, with almost 300 years of history, and it was in danger of being cancelled forever."

Implementing a turnaround strategy, Paniccia got to work rebuilding Solari.

The workforce jumped from 110 to 250 and now includes 60 IT staff to manage the software running the next-generation displays. For customers looking to upgrade – a few still request the flap boards – Solari began offering state-of-the-art LCD and LED displays for rail, airport and motorway operators.

Under Paniccia's tenure, Solari's results have been impressive. Since 1994, revenues have almost tripled, and it now brings in €30m annually. "Some thought the company was past it but we've proven them wrong," says Paniccia. "They forgot that Solari has always been an innovator."

Innovation remains a strong suit for the firm. When French rail operator SNCF needed a new ticket-validating machine to combat fare dodging, Solari brought its experience in timcard punch machines to bear. "Our device makes a permanent imprint on the paper, so when you try to reinsert the ticket the machine won't accept it," says Dino Domeneghetti, former sales manager for France, now technical assistance manager. "SNCF was losing €20m a year on this so you can imagine how happy they were."

As an added bonus, Solari shaped the machines in the form of the nose of France's famous TGV trains. So far, it has delivered 4,000 to SNCF. "It's a nice little design touch, which I think they appreciated," says Domeneghetti. — (M)