

THE COURAGE TO DARE

CONTRARIAN

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In 1923, in Erba, the forging plant Alessandro Ciceri e Figli was founded. That's where Beta originated, a tool company that later became known worldwide also thanks to its historic bond with the world of racing. Today, with annual revenues of 250 million euros, the company continues to grow through the acquisition of Italian SMEs. At its helm, from the headquarters in Brianza, is Roberto Ciceri, the founder's great-grandson.

Translated by Beta Tools



It's August 17, 1975. Heavy rain has soaked the Österreichring circuit so badly that the Austrian Grand Prix is delayed by 45 minutes and then stopped halfway through. Through the downpour moves an orange car. Its front end is broken, but the driver celebrates: 37-year-old Vittorio Brambilla has just won the first and only Formula 1 race of his life. Starting eighth, he finished almost 30 seconds ahead of James Hunt and a minute and a half ahead of pole-sitter Niki Lauda. Only after crossing the finish line he allowed himself a moment of distraction: as he began celebrating, he spun into a barrier.

Fifty years later, motorsport fans still remember that victory. The car was named **Beta Utensili March**. March was a British team founded in the late '60s. Beta Utensili, the sponsor, was the Brianza-based company responsible for the iconic orange livery.

"It was Brambilla who approached my family," recalls **Roberto Ciceri**, now chairman and CEO of the company founded by his great-grandfather. "He knew us because he owned a car repair workshop and used Beta tools. One day he showed up at the company asking if they were interested in sponsoring a Formula 3 car". The Ciceri family accepted, and in the following years supported Brambilla all the way to Formula 1. "Today we take sponsorships for granted. Back then, even in Formula 1, there were teams that self-funded. Hunt's Hesketh, which finished second in that race in Austria, was financed by an English lord. Brambilla and my family, probably unknowingly, were pioneers of sports marketing." When Brambilla approached Beta, says the CEO, "the company was small. To help it grow, we were looking for a high-profile communications project." The choice fell on

motorsports, partly due to family passion and geographical proximity: 'Our headquarters are in Sovico, just north of Monza Park. During the Grand Prix, with the windows open, you can hear the sound of the engines'.

Beta originally began in Erba, Como province. In 1923, Alessandro Ciceri, an employee in a knife company, founded a forging plant specializing in iron and steel molds. His son Damiano moved the business to Sovico in 1939 and radically changed the company business model. Beta shifted from third-party manufacturing, making, for instance, brackets for the Army or components for Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Gilera and Beretta, to producing tools for direct distribution. First in hardware stores in Milan, then gradually in those throughout Italy.

It was one of the first Italian companies to design and manufacture tools domestically, at a time when the sector relied heavily on imports from Germany and the UK. "That's when my grandfather decided we needed a brand," says Ciceri. "He chose Beta, an incredible stroke of luck: it's memorable, easy to use in advertising, and simple to pronounce in any language."



In the '70s, facing labor shortages, Beta expanded production outside Brianza, first to

Lodi area, then in Abruzzo. International expansion began in 1980 with branches in France, the UK, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland and Hungary. Today there are twelve global subsidiaries: nine in Europe, three in China, Brazil and the United States.

In 2024, the Beta Group recorded 252 million euros in revenue, 99 million from exports. It now operates ten industrial plants and employs over 1,000 people. It manufactures tools for mechanics, industrial maintenance and car repair specialists, abrasives, electrical installation and welding products, safety footwear, workwear, and modular workshop furniture. The current CEO represents the fourth generation of the founding family; the fifth, his son Alessandro, is already involved. But recent years were marked by a challenging generational handover.

"Between 2010 and 2015 the family considered leaving the company," Ciceri recalls. "I was the only one who wanted to continue managing and owning Beta. But among four siblings and four cousins, each held one-eighth of the shares. I couldn't buy everyone out."

Ciceri began searching for partners, helped, he believes, by an early-career experience: in the '80s, after graduating in industrial engineering and completing an MBA at Columbia University, he worked for about a year at Salomon Brothers, at that time one of the most important investment banks in Wall Street - Only later did he join the family business, "starting with shifts at six in the morning in the hot pressing department"-. "They handled huge deals. I was the last to arrive, so I mostly did 'number crunching'.

But that experience in mergers and acquisitions proved invaluable."



Eventually Ciceri struck a deal with Tamburi Investment Partners (TIP), the investment bank founded by Giovanni Tamburi. “I chose TIP because it’s an industrial, long-term investor, very different from classic private equity. TIP leaves room for entrepreneurs and allows resources to remain inside the company to support an industrial path. I started with a minority stake, which later grew to 51% upon reaching certain goals.”

This experience also fuelled Ciceri’s belief that “a company is not a dynastic right. It’s a living organism that requires temperament and skills. It is not necessarily the case that these traits are found in multiple generations of the same family. There is a reason why an aeroplane pilot does not pass on his licence to his son. I evaluate my son on the basis of his results, just like any other manager, even if I am perhaps a little happier when he

demonstrates his abilities to me.” It is not surprising, then, that Ciceri does not even like the myth of the superiority of family management over managerial management: “The sector and size can favour one model or the other”. Although in the tool sector, he says, “it pays to be quick and flexible, to make decisions quickly without having to go through committees. If used well, agility is a big advantage. If used badly, it leads to chaos. The Napoleonic drift is always lurking.”

In recent years, Beta has expanded by acquiring companies. “It was a necessity,” Ciceri explains. “To enter new sectors, sometimes you can rely on your own capabilities and brand. Other times you need to acquire a specialist with its own history, know-how and culture.”

So far, Beta has bought six companies, all under 30 million euros in annual revenue.

“Targeting bigger acquisitions would have been presumptuous. We didn’t want financial strain and we needed practice.”

All acquisitions were made in Italy. “It’s nice to say you acquired a company in New Zealand... but then you need to manage it. In our sector you don’t make three decisions a year, you make 30 a day. Being able to reach a site within two hours by car makes a huge difference.”

Now, however, Beta is considering larger deals: “We are evaluating acquisitions of companies up to 100 million in revenue. Anything bigger would require a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Beta operates in three distribution sectors: industrial supply, automotive repair and electrical equipment distribution. In Italy, they have an estimated total value of between €12 and €15 billion. In Europe, industrial supply alone is worth €70 billion, with car repair and the distribution of electrical equipment worth between €35 and €40 billion. The company sees significant growth potential but has no intention of entering raw materials. “But we can target about 40% of the market,” Ciceri notes. Beta’s expansion in recent years is in contrast to many Italian stories. In June, the country’s industrial production rose for the first time after 26 consecutive months of decline. It is natural to wonder whether cases such as those of Beta and other companies can teach us anything. “The truth is that you can’t learn almost anything,” says Ciceri. “We create new markets when we invent something new. It happens, but in most cases we grow because we replace others. In short, we get a bigger slice of a cake that is getting slightly smaller.” The only lesson, he adds, can be found in certain initiatives. Ciceri strongly advocates for initiatives supporting

families and boosting Italy’s birth rate. Beta provides a biennial contributions of up to 8,000€ gross for every newborn or adopted child; full smart working for expectant mothers from the seventh month; 100% coverage of schoolbook costs for middle and high school students and 500€ for university textbooks and gives merit-based scholarships.

“The birth rate is one of Italy’s most severe problems,” Ciceri notes. “A child is a joy, but also a major logistical and economic burden. It’s surprising how few resources are dedicated to such a critical issue. Perhaps the system should take cues from responsible corporate initiatives.”

Even in the tool industry, technology is essential. “Our sector is as old as humankind. But there’s an entire world of technologies to support it,” Ciceri explains, citing the use of artificial intelligence in supply chain management, planning, administration and market research. Design is also crucial: Beta develops modular workshop systems and uses advanced simulation tools, 3D models and immersive experiences.

Sports have always been a strategic innovation driver. Since the days of Brambilla and March, the link with competitions has never been broken. The headquarters includes a meeting room with a Formula 1 Jordan in the center of the table and over 200 helmets signed by riders. Even after leaving Formula 1 official sponsorships due to skyrocketing costs, Beta remains very active: in cycling, nautical sports and especially MotoGP, partnering with almost all teams. “We create products that millions of people see every weekend without knowing they’re ours,” Ciceri explains “Such as the furniture and storage units inside the MotoGP pit boxes, or

the heated-wheel carts pushed onto the starting grid.”

Presence in sport fuels, for example, research into materials. “Collaborations with racing teams - and sometimes with aeronautics - help Beta develop solutions requiring extremely low weight and minimal volume. Producing a titanium wrench for a spacecraft or for a motorcycle hitting 300 km/h demands exceptional reliability.”

Sometimes, racing inspires new product lines: “MotoGP asked us for integrated modular workshop equipment: systems that can be

assembled and disassembled extremely quickly. The concept is the same as the integrated kitchens found in any modern home. Later, we started selling them outside motorsport as well.”

Sport, says Ciceri, “is an opportunity for business, as well as prestige, experience, image and communication. Most of the time, our tools are in the hands of people working on machines, repairing or building something. Sport gives that work a fresh coat of paint,” he concludes.

Matteo Novarini