

## Coffee Talk with Sergio



**Please tell us about yourself, who are you and what do you do?** I got into the paper business by accident. Like so many students, I was looking for a summer job to pay my way through college. It was back in 1971. It was supposed to be a temporary job, a couple of months... but it became my life's work.

In fact: my life! Fifteen years of paper mill work made me fall in love with the world of paper. More than a world, a universe! Then one day I got the "crazy idea" to make something of my own, as they say. It was the late 1980s and environmentalist culture was spreading in Italy as well. Now we all know that paper enters our lives every day in a wide variety of ways. Despite digital, writing on a sheet of paper, in a beautiful notebook, on the pages of a fine notebook, is still a unique experience. So I thought that giving people the possibility to write on beautiful recycled paper stationery would be a way to make a concrete gesture in defense of the environment. That is how Arbos (from the Latin arbos: tree) was born in 1988.

**How did your journey towards sustainability begin and how did you come up with the initial idea?** There were already recycled paper products in the Italian stationery market from abroad, particularly from Germany. But they were lar-

gely products that conveyed a "sad" idea of recycling, somewhat gray. I realized that a joyful idea of recycling had to be given instead, a colorful and beautiful image. Beauty: This was the concept that could propel the development of recycling! Combining beauty and recycling would have been Arbos' mission. How have we implemented this mission from 1988 to the present? Involving the world of design and art in our projects. As a reminder, Arbos has collaborated with more than 50 artists and designers in these more than 30 years.

**What are the biggest challenges you face?** I am not exaggerating when I say that the history of Arbos is all about challenges. The first challenge in order of time was the search for recycled materials: recycled paper and cardboard but also recycled leather, and recycled cloth. Contrary to what many people think, recycled materials are not recent products. These are materials that have existed for years, but are used as "poor" materials in many industries, where they are almost always hidden inside products because they are considered "ugly." Finding these materials and adapting them to more noble uses in the stationery industry presented no small challenge. Think for example of what we call straw paper: it is a paper that is still used in agriculture. Today it is no longer made from straw but from waste paper from urban collection. Due to its composition, it is not usable in the offset printing industry where it can produce serious damage to printing

Insights about the project

### "Arbos"

by Sergio Paolin, Italy  
[www.arbos.it](http://www.arbos.it)

presses. Well, we had to specially modify a printing press in order to use it. We made a similar point about recycled leather, a material that Arbos used for the first time in Italy in the stationery industry. I will stop here, but I could continue with numerous other examples. I also neglect to recount the challenges we faced on the commercial front to convince stores to buy our recycled material products.

**What is a possible future for your initiative? Where do you want to be within five years?** Arbos' future is to experiment with using other recycled materials. I am thinking in particular of the problem of plastic and rubber recycling. While the main goal is undoubtedly a decisive reduction in the use of plastics, there is no doubt, however, that nonetheless the problem of increased recycling of plastic waste must be addressed, recycling which currently does not exceed 10%. This is why Arbos last year created OCEAN, its first line of recycled plastic items produced by recycling plastic waste from river cleaning. It is a circular economy project that also involved other companies



*Since 1988, Arbos has specialized in combining beauty and recycling to create colorful and beautiful recycled paper products.*





and the environmental association MareVivo, which has been involved in the defense of marine ecosystems for years. A further line of development in Arbos production will be aimed at the use of bioplastics, polymers of plant origin that allow 100 percent biodegradability. Of course, we will try to use these new materials according to our productive philosophy: to make beautiful objects, useful for everyday life.

**If you have three free wishes, what would you wish for?** Of wishes I have only one, but a big one! A wish that, if fulfilled, would truly make my happiness and represent the best epilogue to my working life. Since no one in my family will carry on the business (my only daughter has other interests) I would like to see young people interested in realizing the future of Arbos, making it a place where economy and culture, design and manufacturing can meet and contaminate each other, ex-

perimenting with new business models. Already I have come a piece of the way, making Arbos a benefit company and also obtaining B-Corp certification, a prestigious corporate social responsibility certification. I would very much like that school-workshop model to be realized in our time as well. That was present in the Renaissance.

**What do you think we all can do to solve the plastic pollution problem in general?** Our relationship with plastics is a very complex issue. Plastic is something strongly inter-twined with the very idea of "modernity". It seems to me that we have not yet fully developed the conceptual toolkit to address the problem in all its aspects. Sometimes I see ideological positions, which I call "Taliban", which do not help to deal rationally with the problem. That said, it is clear that solving the increasingly dramatic problem of plastic pollution requires

action at multiple levels. Priority is the goal of complete elimination of single-use plastics. The real challenge, however, is to make this goal achievable by all countries in the world, including the so-called underdeveloped countries. The other way forward is the gradual replacement of traditional, hydrocarbon-derived plastics with bioplastics. Here research and experimentation are yielding important results, as evidenced by the very interesting book "So Long, Plastic!". It gives great hope to see that some of this research has already led to new materials that can validly replace traditional plastics in quite a few applications. I think it is the responsibility of every entrepreneur to see how in his or her industry these new materials can already be used. I know it is a challenge to take on the technical and economic problems involved. We at Arbos are strongly committed to this challenge. As always, accepting challenges is in our nature!

