

# Making Waves on the Web

## A conversation with [www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com) creator Michael Bruno

### Philip Alvare

I agreed to meet [www.1stdibs.com](http://www.1stdibs.com) creator and CEO Michael Bruno for an interview at a charming little café in the West Village, NYC, called “St. Ambroeus.” The awning bearing the name is flanked on either side by Italian words: *Gelateria* and *Pasticceria*. If the words weren’t in Italian I’d swear I was on the left bank in Paris. The facade of the red brick Victorian building housing the café with its wrought iron columns and ornamental lime stone window-casings, however, is pure Greenwich Village.

Like Bruno’s Website, the feeling in the West Village is cosmopolitan, confirmed by a polyglot buzz of conversations in any language but English. It seemed appropriate for a meeting with a man who left a successful career in San Francisco real estate in 2000 and moved to Paris where he created an international Website. Michael Bruno turned Internet entrepreneur when he launched 1stdibs in Paris in 2001 and brought the Paris Flea Market (*Marché aux Puces -Clingancourt*) and the Left Bank to the World Wide Web. He hit the nail on the head – timing: impeccable.

Today, 1stdibs links a world of up-market antiques and decorative and fine arts sellers with serious buyers. By 2003 Bruno had expanded 1stdibs to New York City and now also includes dealers from LA, San Francisco, Hudson, the Hamptons, New Orleans and the list goes on and on. Dealers, with inventory clearly and attractively represented on the site, and designers – who source pieces for their clients through 1stdibs – agree that it works. The beautifully designed site allows a buyer to sort by category of furniture, period, city, designer and manufacturer, presenting a nearly encyclopedic range of information. It’s as much an educational tool as it is a source of great pieces. As Bruno expressed to the *New York Times*, May 3, 2001: “Our goal is to present items as close as possible to the moment they hit the market.”

While there are scores of Websites catering to the antiques and collectibles market, creating a glut of merchandise online, few have been able to capture the legitimate antiques market. Many have failed. 1stdibs, though, is flourishing. What makes it different? Is timing everything? Not necessarily so. Bruno transferred the business savvy he acquired in the world of real estate directly to the world of design. He identified a niche in the market and filled it. The business plan is the same: present your client with the best the market has to offer and make the sales process buyer and seller friendly. Everybody wins. Then, pray your timing’s good.

### A Valuable Business Tool

Whether it’s Paris, New York, LA, San Francisco or New Orleans, Michael Bruno created an indispensable tool for the trade. If rave reviews from both sides of the aisle (decorators and dealers) prove viability, then 1stdibs is alive and well. M(Group) principal Carey Maloney – who I imagine replies to my emails via WiFi as he criss-crosses time zones on the global grid – attends to projects and clients around the world. Maloney recalls meeting Bruno in Paris when 1stdibs launched during *Carre Rive Gauche*.

“His idea was so clever I remember it vividly,” Maloney said. “We love the site and use it – often finding things from Palm Beach, L.A., Hudson, Paris and NYC dealers. It’s served to remind me of things I’d seen and forgotten, then saw on site and bought.”

Hudson, NY, antiques and fine arts dealer Jennifer Arenskjold, *Arenskjold Antiques & Art*, who – with her husband Kim – spends time between New York and Copenhagen finds the site, “extremely well-designed and thought out. It’s clear and easy to use. They’ve selected only reliable dealers and limited the number, thus ensuring consistency and good quality merchandise.”

It doesn’t stop there for Arenskjold. “1stdibs has excellent technical support and responds quickly to questions,” she said, “and anyone I have dealt with there – whether support staff or others – has been responsive and instantly helpful. Our mer-



**1stdibs founder and CEO Michael Bruno.**

**RIGHT: Frederick P. Victoria and Son, of New York, recently offered this superb Art Nouveau period open arm chair from Belgium, c. 1900 on 1stDibs.**



chandise has been exposed to a broad audience and it’s greatly enhanced our sales.”

### A Clear Model

Arenskjold and others see the site’s clear and lucid design as another key to its success. There are good consistent photographs and an extensive direct email list that mails out 600 new items every week. In addition to controlling consistency and the look of the site, 1stdibs provides its own photographer in each city, who then visits each member dealer and photographs their new merchandise. Each dealer is allowed a minimum of 10 new items per month. The photos are then “Photoshopped” and sent back to the dealer within a week. Next, the dealers put in descriptions, measurements and any other pertinent information and then the finished information is emailed back to 1stdibs. The site then broadcasts emails every Wednesday by 11 a.m. EST to its extensive list of subscribers, which includes collectors as well as architects, designers and the like.

With 35,000 pieces of inventory available through the site’s 250 dealers – each of whom receive approximately 600,000 visits per month – 1stdibs is a force to reckon with in the market worldwide. Some might even think that it’s the *only* way business is being conducted these days.

### A Conversation

Necessity is the mother of invention and, perhaps, it’s our good fortune that Michael Bruno’s initial foray into the World Wide Web was, while not exactly accidental, definitely serendipitous. It was the result of his having moved to Paris without a stick of furniture, of renting a flat and finding himself in need of furnishings. Thus began the odyssey that became 1stdibs, the most successful current sources for antiques, fine arts and decorative objects on the Internet., and certainly the most attractive.

As antiques luminary Byrne Fone, who divides his time between France and the US, wrote:

“(1stdibs) is impeccably run and without a doubt an international avenue to more designers, dealers and retail trade than one could ever expect to get into (a) shop... it is the wave of the future...”

Philip Alvaré (PA): Tell me a little bit about your transition from from the time you left San Francisco and the real estate business until you arrived in Paris.

Michael Bruno (MB): I felt real estate would always be there (in San Francisco) and if I wanted to take a shot at doing something different, the only way to do it was to pick up and leave. As long as I stayed in San Francisco it would be too tempting to stay in my old line of work.

PA: You describe arriving in Paris without a stick of furniture and hunting around the flea market and realizing you had better move more quickly and make decisions, or

the pieces you were interested in would be sold.

MB: Well, it wasn’t only the flea market. I lived on the left bank, in the 6th (arrondissement), and there are some amazing shops there. I would see absolutely gorgeous pieces that I would become intrigued by and I’d look and think about it. By the time I’d come back a few days later, most of the time, they’d be sold.

PA: Very high turnover.

MB: Yes, a high turnover. The dealers said the good things stayed in the store a week to 10 days and that was it. I realized there had to be a market for people who love these pieces, because sometimes you only see these things in Paris – you just don’t see them anywhere else unless you might see them in a magazine. The dealers told me that it was mostly interior designers and their clients who came to buy a lot of the things I liked. I thought, “why not build a business that caters to the interior designers



**American designer Paul Evans’ “Skyline” Series Coffee Table from the 1970s, also offered by Eric Appel. It features a square form covered with irregular shaped brass and chrome metal tiles.**



**A Biedermeier Specimen Cabinet, early nineteenth century Austria, from Eric Appel of New York City. Recently offered on 1stdibs, this tall glazed cabinet in maple veneers with a deep draw at the base and hidden draw in the pediment. Formerly part of the estate of Eva Schulman (editor of Vogue).**

and brings them information on these items as they became available?” If they weren’t in Paris they could effectively shop Paris.

PA: Had you already been involved with the design community? It seems you have an affinity for this.

MB: No. I only really knew a few interior designers. Prior to this business I had a passion for residential architecture and that still supersedes my interest in furniture. I’m still crazy about great old houses. So, with a great old house you typically need to put some great stuff into it. That became the next level.

PA: In real estate the most effective marketing scheme seems to be: present a broad array of high quality inventory to your clients, many of whom simply don’t have time to schlep around looking at thousands of properties. You’ve winnowed it down to the choice presentation. Is that how your model for 1stdibs was created?

MB: Exactly. It was very much based on my experience, and while we maintain a level of editorial control in selecting the dealers, we do that knowing that the dealers we select and work with have a “good eye,” and they pick out interesting things. By being comfortable with the dealer we assured ourselves that we’d have interesting inventory on the site.

PA: When someone logs on, they have to join your site as a buyer, right?

MB: All we really require is that you enter an email address and password, so we know you have an active email address.

PA: How is the shipping arranged? Do you function as a paymaster?

MB: The customer has a choice: We provide a service that will arrange shipping for them, or they can choose to organize it themselves. When someone buys something on the site, they can pay with a credit card and the whole transaction can be processed, if you wish, without ever having to speak to a person. You can do it all online.

PA: One of your keys to success is that you’ve accommodated both the buyer and



**An Overscaled West German Art Pottery Lamp, West Germany, 1960s, was offered by Buck House of New York City.**



**Los Angeles-based Paul Marra offered these 1940s “Polynesian” Style Lamps on 1stdibs. With heavy cast plaster they are very well executed with great detail. The painted finish resembles faux bois.**

the seller, anticipating a variety of scenarios,



making it all very accessible.

MB: We let people choose how they want to operate. Our objective is to provide a marketplace that has legitimate, ethical dealers who've been in business for a period of time and who have a clue about what they're doing. Plus it's in a controlled environment where the buyer can feel assured that this is somebody who's really in business. We've been to their store. We've built a relationship with them and they don't have to worry about that person going missing.

PA: Everyone I talk to gives you rave reviews. You consistently receive very high marks from dealers and designers.

MB: We work very hard at that. We made a sacrifice on income in order to provide a good service."

PA: You have 250 dealers and at any given time there are 600 dealers on a waiting list, correct?

MB: We're going to accept 25 new dealers for next year, primarily around New England and Atlanta.

PA: You mentioned you were hoping to round out areas on the site where there wasn't that much representation such as porcelain, silver and other objects.

MB: Yes, we're going to provide some of the spaces to dealers in Atlanta, and some to beef up New England and the balance will go to a handful of people in those specialties (porcelain and silver, etc.). We're going to include Boston and Woodbury and Atlanta

and it's obviously focused on antiques based on those market places.

PA: We discussed how a lot of people have identified 1stdibs as a source for mid-century modern. The recent trend in decorating has also been mid-century and this is what people are buying. Mid-century is fashionable right now, but that's changing as we speak. A designer friend of mine said that the minute you identify something as "in," it's as good as "out."

MB: Most designers are very focused on creating their style, and it may be one particular designer that does something traditionally for their whole career. Then there are designers who always want to be on the cutting edge of something. The dealers we work with are pretty much in tune with the market and I think the inventory evolves with them. We do have dealers that are beginning to cross into a more eclectic mix, from straight modern to antiques, and we've seen antiques dealers go from antiques to modern, so it's an evolving thing. They're the ones who're on the forefront, in the field, at auctions, working with people who are finding things from estates.

PA: You upload every Wednesday. When?

MB: 11 a.m. EST. Basically, each week the photographers are visiting the stores all over the world, wherever we have cities we deal with. During the course of that week, a dealer's newest inventory is photographed, photoshopped, uploaded, the text is added and it goes on line. We do it that way so that every week we can bring the newest inven-

tory to market.

PA: It sounds like an effective process.

MB: It's like a factory or production facility of editing images, because dealers want their best merchandise on line. It's their chance to show off and we're very excited about that because we're seeing things that were, perhaps, purchased at an auction on a Monday. They may then be online by Wednesday. That fast.

PA: Buyers can essentially shop the world. You put approximately how many new pictures on line each week?

MB: It's about 700. It's our goal to get about 100 pictures from Paris each week, then NYC and L.A. have a lot of the balance, and then all the other areas. I could tell you the actual percentages, but it changes every week, so you could never say it's always this way...

PA: You mentioned you had about 500,000 hits a month,

MB: It's about 600,000 *visits*, and that's different than hits.

PA: How do you define visits as opposed to hits?

MB: Well, if you went to our Website today and went around and looked at a lot of stuff, you might make 30 hits, but that was only one visit. The hits, right now, on a monthly basis are more than 70 million."

PA: Why do you think 1stdibs works? Why have you been the leader?

MB: We provide a full service; we're a full service agency and we get the job done. We make sure there's new inventory every week to keep the designers interested. We make it easy for the dealers to get their inventory on line by doing all the ground work, photography, the uploading, the photoshop thing - so we're able to create a clean presentation that the designers can comfortably use. There's consistency in searching the site from one dealer to the next, in the layout and image and in the presentation. It's very easy for a designer to present to their clients.

PA: What's the most remote part of the planet you've shipped things to?

MB: I know we have things going to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and Dubai, but that's not so remote any more. I know we have people buying things that go to South America, Brazil and Buenos Aires. I can't think of a particular address...Hmmmnnn....Hong Kong...

PA: Nothing to Timbuktu, yet?  
MB: I thought Kuwait was pretty remote.

PA: What do you think is your next venture? Clearly 1stdibs keeps growing and is a work in progress.

MB: Maybe what to do in Europe. How to expand further in Europe.

PA: It's seems like it's a wonderfully creative process for you and I don't suppose creative projects are ever finished.

MB: No. That's the point of doing them, isn't it?