



■ Susanna Valerio and her son, Niccolo Santi, have learned to make their differences work.

# MEETING OF MINDS

A mother and son are poles apart, but have created a good business together, writes *Kelis Wong*

Susanna Valerio and her son, Niccolo Santi, were meeting a chairman of a hotel chain, about to sign off on a redecoration deal.

"I had a pen in my hand," Santi recalled. "Then I heard my mom say: 'By the way ... I thought: 'Oh, God! What is she going to say?'"

Valerio looked at the client, and said: "I am sorry. I don't like your tie."

Santi said: "I thought this was it. But the guy said: 'Thank you. I really appreciate your honesty. Come and design my home.'"

"Niccolo doesn't bring me to client meetings anymore because he knows if I don't like something, I will say it," Valerio said. "But he is wrong because people like me."

Emotions always run high when Valerio and Santi are in the same room.

The Italian duo run an interior design company, SV International Design, together.

They are polar opposites in personalities.

Valerio said Santi, as managing director, has brought structure into the company she founded in 1999. He honed his skills at Swire, working as management trainee for Coca-Cola after finishing university in the UK.

"I've never met anyone who has his attention to detail," she said. "He can work for 18 hours, missing a

dinner with friends because he has to finish a small detail and it has to be perfect."

Santi described Valerio, now creative director, as a "madly talented artist." She used to head the homeware buying department of Joyce Boutique, and was senior consultant of Lane Crawford's home and lifestyle section.

He knows that though Valerio is goal-oriented, she hates to be bogged down by obligations. So when she feels bored, she will drift off. "At meetings, I know her attention span is short so I pack everything in the beginning, when I need her," said Santi.

He joined the firm three years ago. Back then, the firm was a one-woman band, with Valerio handling everything from issuing quotations to providing consultancy services.

Business continued to grow. Hotel-decoration orders kept coming in. Guests wanted Valerio to decorate their homes. Several home-accessories makers in Italy asked her to represent them in Asia.

Valerio was overwhelmed.

Santi, who had wanted to start his own company, stepped in. His main job these days is to fly around the world to grow new markets, such

as the United States and Middle East, leaving Valerio to focus on her expertise.

Today, there are three divisions under SV International Design. The company holds exclusive distribution rights in the SAR and the Asia-Pacific for four family-run Italian labels.

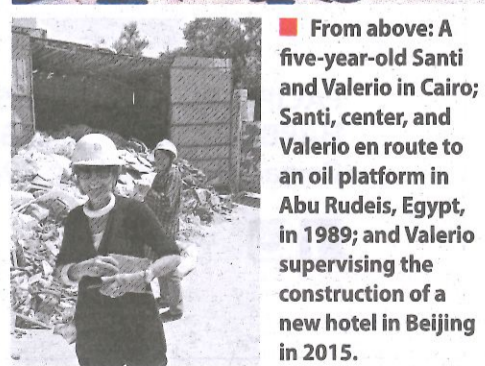
The home and hotel project branch has refurbished some 150 luxury hotels.

SV Casa, the retail arm which Santi brought about, has department store counters worldwide. Another great push into retail happened this week as SV Casa launched its e-commerce site, selling both ready-made as well as made-to-order household accessories designed or curated by Valerio and Santi.

Valerio and Santi have found a way to get along. Their offices are at extreme ends. They also came to appreciate each other more. "Structures are annoying but necessary, otherwise things will go nowhere," Valerio said. "But I still do things that he doesn't know. Sometimes, I don't copy him in an e-mail. I just ask a factory to do what I want."

Santi said: "My job is to create a company where artistic people like Susanna have the freedom to make and design amazing things – facilitated by the structures I've put in place."

And Valerio has learnt not to mother her son in office. "So when I go to lunch, I don't bring him any sandwiches," she said.



■ From above: A five-year-old Santi and Valerio in Cairo; Santi, center, and Valerio en route to an oil platform in Abu Rudeis, Egypt, in 1989; and Valerio supervising the construction of a new hotel in Beijing in 2015.

