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# The Engineer of Everyday Objects

By ELLEN GAMERMAN



Christopher Churchill for The Wall Street Journal

Gianfranco Zaccai at Continuum's West Newton, Mass., headquarters.

Industrial designer Gianfranco Zaccai is lying in a hospital bed. But he's not sick. The fake hospital room sits in his company's offices, placed there to help find new ideas for a health-care client.

Mr. Zaccai spends most days trying to come up with the next big idea. On this summer morning he is trying to find inspiration for a range of new hospital furnishings. "We try to empathize," he said, resting on the white sheets. "Pretend to be a patient."

Mr. Zaccai's work requires him and his staff to pretend to be a lot of things: a Chinese parent (for Pampers diapers in that country), a basketball player (for the Reebok Pump sneaker), a bargain hunter (for a plastic Target shopping cart), a child with diabetes (for an insulin pump easily hidden under clothes), an aging driver (for BMW to help customers locate dashboard controls) and so on.



In 1983, Mr. Zaccai co-founded Continuum, a



Continuum

A recent whiteboard from the company's work on improving customer experience in health care.



Continuum

Researchers surrounded by Post-it notes.

child of a photographer father and an artist-homemaker mother. He studied industrial design at Syracuse University and later got a degree in architectural design at Boston Architectural College. He is now president and chief design officer at Continuum, having given up the CEO position two years ago to give himself more time to work on projects.

Health care is an increasing focus for Mr. Zaccai, whose firm won seven International Design Excellence Awards this summer for its work on products including a vertical monitor that helps nurses and doctors more easily read patient data and modular wall-mounted furnishings for hospitals.

Recently, the company conducted interviews with aging Americans about their experience with a health-care service—Mr. Zaccai wouldn't discuss details because of client confidentiality—and the staff sketched out the high points on long pieces of brown paper. They taped up each strip, dubbed a "journey map." A staffer on low metal stilts read the interview strips taped closer to the ceiling.

Researchers attached color-coded Post-it notes to flag feelings and insights. The staff spotted patterns,

consultancy that designs new products and services, works on brand makeovers and conducts consumer research. The roughly 200-person staff includes designers, engineers, MBAs and artists. The firm in West Newton, Mass., with offices in Los Angeles, Milan, Seoul and Shanghai, has worked with clients such as PepsiCo, American Express, L.L. Bean and Sprint.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Zaccai joined a brainstorming session for Preserve, a sustainable-consumer-products company trying to make reusable takeout-food containers for college campuses. At 64, he was the oldest person in the meeting.

A staffer in white jeans and flip-flops started the session by restating the ground rules. The most important one: no trashing others' ideas. An employee stood at a wall covered with dry-erase boards and drew pictures of every idea the group tossed out, even the crazy ones—like a portable food container that would follow a person from cradle to grave (the scribe drew a baby with an arrow pointing to an old man in a walker).

Observation is crucial. The firm's researchers may live in a consumer's home for several days to watch their behavior. (The Swiffer WetJet, a mop with a disposable head that racked up millions in sales for Procter & Gamble, resulted in part from team members' observations of people washing their floors.) In the office, 185 clipboards hold photos of consumers whose behavior or comments, observed in the field, have sparked new ideas.

As one staffer put it, the firm's philosophy is: "Go to where the lion is hunting, not the zoo."

Mr. Zaccai moved to Syracuse, N.Y., from Brescia, Italy, east of Milan, when he was 9 years old, the youngest

like an unexpected spike in frustration when people picked up their prescriptions—suggesting that pharmacies are places where Americans struggle emotionally with the cost of their drugs.

Such insights on their own don't usually lead to new discoveries, Mr. Zaccai said, but without sifting through a large number of them, it's hard to find the one most important idea.

"The biggest mistake people make is to collect all the data and try to make sense as if it all had the same importance," Mr. Zaccai said. "You try to stand back and see what the high points are."

### *Techniques behind the Swiffer, Reebok pumps and the Target cart*

- Industrial designer Gianfranco Zaccai snaps pictures with his iPhone during the day to capture small moments of inspiration, but he says that he does his best thinking with his staff, a diverse team whose members have included a former circus performer and a neurologist who studied mouse brains.
- Though the company tries to create a nurturing environment for developing new ideas (one work room bore a sign that read "Don't Stop Believin' "), the staff tests those ideas by conducting several rounds of consumer research. "Coming up with an idea is no problem," Mr. Zaccai said. "It's having the confidence that you can be a strong advocate of it, feeling it comes from actual evidence and it's not half-baked."
- Researchers may have to get creative to gain access. To deal with privacy restrictions on hospitals, a Continuum team working on a health-care project relied on a pregnant staffer and employees with ailing relatives to help gather information during their hospital visits.
- The company tries to turn abstract design ideas into crude models at the start of a project, using on-site workshops specializing in metal, plastics and robotics. It recently rented a warehouse space to house a full-scale foam-core mock-up of a hotel lobby in a project for Holiday Inn.
- Visual aids are the key to driving home an idea. Meetings are often interrupted with video interviews or animated clips.
- Metaphors are useful. The staff envisioned "Get Well" balloons when trying to design hospital furniture that would seem light and airy.
- Staffers try to see old habits with new eyes. They built a shower in the office to help come up with a new showerhead line for Moen and studied the behaviors of volunteers videotaped in their showers at home.

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