

PERSONAL BUSINESS

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For Tabacalera El Artista's Ram Rodriguez, premium cigars and tobacco may be the products of his business, but it's people that are at the heart of everything he and his business does.





Ram Rodriguez is the third generation of a family rooted in tobacco. In 1956, his grandfather launched what's known today as Tabacalera El Artista S.R.L., one of the Dominican Republic's largest producers of premium cigars. Tabacalera El Artista makes millions of cigars a year and distributes them to the

U.S., Canada, Europe, Sweden and Norway. In addition to being a manufacturer, Tabacalera El Artista also manages farms in the Caribbean and South America where it grows tobacco that's used in its proprietary blends and also sold to other cigar manufacturers for use in theirs. Completing its business operation is Tobacco & Cigars Distribution Corp. (TCD), a logistics company based in Miami, Florida, that distributes the cigars it makes.

All of that being said, this isn't your typical business or trade story.

For some, business is all about profit margins, compounding interest and product superiority. When you speak to Rodriguez about business, however, it's a very different conversation. The presence and theme of family comes up more often than not, and instead of focusing on how much money can be made, Rodriguez makes it all very personal. Business is an extension of his family; it's a legacy and responsibility he's now entrusted with managing each day and expanding on for the next generation of his family.

Rodriguez doesn't shy away from talking about his initial reluctance to join the family's business. As many in the tobacco industry can relate to, he spent time in the factory as a young teenager at the request—or demand—of his father. However, this didn't lead him to willingly embrace his future in tobacco. It wasn't until he attended his first trade show and saw how the family's business impacted other people that things suddenly clicked for him. That personal connection—seeing and meeting the retailers and understanding how consumers connected with the family by way of the products they helped create—set Rodriguez on a new path at age 18 and opened his eyes to new opportunities.

Although it's not uncommon today to find “the next generation” of a family involved in cigars getting into their family's business, for a long time Rodriguez was one of the youngest executives in the premium tobacco space. He wanted to honor the work and sacrifices made by his father and grandfather but also decided to fully embrace his leadership position by putting his own stamp on Tabacalera El Artista and its various business units.

In the story that follows, Rodriguez shares how focusing on people and their connection to his business helped him grow as a leader. He also digs into how making people the focus of your business—whether they are part of your team, a retail partner or the end consumer—will result in more wins than solely focusing on products and profit.

Finding His Place

Rodriguez was born in 1990, and from a very early age he found himself surrounded by tobacco. Rodriguez's infatuation with the cigar industry was not automatic; it developed over time. When he was a teenager, Rodriguez's father wanted him to learn about the tobacco business, so he began working in the factory. He and his father made a deal: He'd come to the factory each day and would stay until it closed. He did this until he turned 18, at which point Rodriguez received training in different parts of the tobacco manufacturing process.

“When I was 18, I went to my very first IPCPR [International Premium Cigar & Pipe Retailers Association trade show] in Las Vegas. That was in 2007. That's when I realized what happens to the cigars after we put them



Ram Rodriguez was resistant to the idea of joining his family's tobacco business up until he attended his first trade show and was able to see and learn of the impact his family's business had on retailers and their consumers.

into a box and put them in a truck to ship them to a container to the U.S. I realized that cigars were a big deal for a lot of people, and it wasn't just a product that people consume. It's a way of life.”

Rodriguez left that year's trade show with a new perspective and attitude toward the cigar industry. When he returned to the factory, he was motivated and ready to learn as much as he could about the tobacco business. The years spent working in the factory as a young teenager gave him a better foundation ahead of his “official” start in the industry, but he found that there was plenty more to learn. By this point in his career, he knew he had to figure out the commercial side of things, which he knew very little about. He also needed to learn about all of the different processes involved in tobacco and cigar making, from how to sort tobacco to how to roll a cigar. The more Rodriguez worked in the factory, the stronger the desire grew to create his own brand.

“I challenged myself to make that happen,” Rodriguez shares. “When I was 32, I decided to open a company in the U.S.”

Rodriguez established a distribution company in Miami and launched his first brand. This was similar to the entrepreneurial aspirations of his father and grandfather. When he first launched his business, Rodriguez's grandfather started off with a small workshop and a couple of cigar rollers. The cigars that were made were sold locally before they were distributed on a national level. When Rodriguez's father took over the family's business, he expanded on what his own father had started; the cigars produced in the



Rodriguez has not been afraid to put his own stamp on the business, from introducing green initiatives within the factory to bringing new blends to the market that are atypical when it comes to what Tabacalera El Artista is known for.

factory were not just available locally but were soon exported to the U.S. and Spain. The tobacco trading part of the business was also expanded upon.

When Rodriguez took a more prominent role in the company, he also felt compelled to grow the business. The challenge came in honoring what his father and grandfather had built but also taking the business into the future and growing it. Rodriguez focused his efforts on the factory and its workers, making sure every employee was getting the best from the company and that the working environment was ideal for everyone.

A Day in the Life of Ram Rodriguez

Although Rodriguez is focused on honoring what his father and grandfather built and accomplished before him, he's not afraid to bring his own approach to the family's tobacco business. For example, his father and others in his father's generation view increasing regulations as something to be concerned about. Rodriguez, however, is open to all the new challenges and views them as opportunities to grow and a reason to do things differently, something he also attributes to his background as an industrial engineer. Another instance of Rodriguez opting to do things in a new way can be seen within the Tabacalera El Artista

factory and its use of solar panels. Not only does the use of solar panels benefit the factory economically; it also helps the environment and Artista's surrounding community.

"I'm very open to market trends and seeing what we can do to follow those trends," he says. "Now that I'm running the cigar making operations in the factory, almost all of the people who work with me are young as well, allowing us to identify changes and opportunities better."

Today, Rodriguez holds many titles within his family's tobacco business. Due to there being so many different divisions and operations within the vertically integrated company, Rodriguez is the vice president of Tabacalera El Artista (with his father serving as its president). He's the president of Artista Cigars, which handles the sale of the company's cigars in the U.S. and international markets, and he's also responsible for the Miami operations of the company's logistics and back-office company, TCD Logistics.

With so many responsibilities falling on him, Rodriguez's days are far different from how they were when he first started working within his family's business as a teenager. Back then, he was reluctant for many

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In addition to simplifying the company's name to Artista Cigars this past July, Rodriguez's company announced a new brand strategy and launched new cigar lines.

years about spending too much time in the factory. Things are different today. Nowadays, he spends most of his days in the Dominican Republic, splitting his time between work and family. After waking up close to 6 a.m., he spends time with his wife and kids before leaving for work. Right now, Rodriguez is overseeing the construction of his company's new factory that will be located in La Vega, the fourth largest city in the Dominican Republic, where a team of about 500 people are already slated to begin working once construction is complete. By the end of the year, that number is expected to rise to 800 employees.

"Most mornings, that factory is my first stop," he explains. "Since we are building it from scratch, I usually spend the whole morning there."

As is typical for Dominican families, lunchtime is spent with his family. He goes back home to have lunch with his immediate family, and if he's short on time, he'll have lunch with his parents who live close to the company's headquarters. After lunch, Rodriguez is back at the main factory, where he follows up with his team and picks up whatever cigars are in production that require his approval before their official release. This isn't the end of his workday. After leaving the factory, Rodriguez then devotes some time to the company's logistics division, where he follows up with the team there, replies to emails and spends time in his father's office catching up on the latest happenings. Two to three times a week, Rodriguez also fits in a visit to Moca, a city located in the Dominican Republic's Cibao region, where part of the company's operations are based, and to the Santo Domingo neighborhood of Monte Adentro, where its wooden box factory is located.

This work also extends into the weekend. On Saturdays, Rodriguez can usually be found in the company's main building, where he spends time with the operations department and addresses any concerns and the latest tasks at hand.

The Crisis Advantage

Rodriguez splits his time and attention across many different areas and issues relating to his business, but his main focus is adapting his company to today's situation and finalizing the infrastructure renovation process that was started five years ago. "We are almost done with it," he reveals. "The only building we need to finish is our oldest one, our headquarters, where we already built two modern aging rooms and an innovative pest control system, which will be one-of-a-kind in the industry."

Infrastructure and improving the factory's overall operations is not something you hear spoken about in the cigar industry a lot, but one can tell it's of great importance to Rodriguez. He and his father have upgraded the electrical grid in all of its facilities, added new security features and improved the plumbing. There's also an expansion in the works with a new packing department being built and new machines being brought in to handle the factory's medium filler private labels. Some enhancements will specifically help the employees, such as the upgraded climate control system located within the working areas. To build on the factory's production capabilities, new warehouses, curing barns and an upgraded solar panel system are all on the table. Outside of the factory and headquarters, the surrounding roads within the industrial parks and surrounding neighborhoods where the business is based are also almost completely fixed. Many of these projects and improvements have been in the works for years and progressed despite challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I always say that a crisis is the right moment to take advantage in a market," Rodriguez states. "We have worked five years on an infrastructure renovation project, and the pandemic hit us right at the most critical time. Initially, we started with a warehouse shortage problem, but we overcame it. Then later, a labor shortage. This was the main reason why we decided to establish new operations in a nontraditional tobacco region of the island.



Knowing how important employees are in the future growth potential of his company, Rodriguez puts special focus and emphasis on employees and ensuring their needs are addressed and well taken care of.

Now there's an inflation and supply chain crisis that is not allowing us to release products at the desired time. But on the plus side, this crisis has helped us to establish relationships with new suppliers and customers, and we know that, in the end, things will come back to normal—and probably better than they were before.”

One of the unexpected impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on Tabacalera El Artista was the increased demand for premium cigars. Artista has long been viewed as a good place to work by many. After the pandemic, the company was able to retain about 85 percent of its team members, according to Rodriguez. The problem was that they needed even more employees than before to help the company meet the demand from the market. To address this new problem, Rodriguez and his team had to think outside of the box. La Vega is located almost 25 miles away from the traditional growing region of the Dominican Republic. Rodriguez's company was able to secure industrial space in this untapped region where they will establish a new operation.

“We have been there for about 18 months, and we are already manufacturing premium cigars and have a big tobacco sorting facility there,” he says. “Best of all, this is a win-win situation: La Vega is known for its clothing manufacturing culture, and that industry was heavily hit by the pandemic, so the unemployment rate was big. Now in La Vega, people are realizing that working with tobacco is much more stable, and they are happy that they are learning new skills and building a career.”

One of the most fulfilling parts of the job for Rodriguez is seeing how individuals grow and progress within his organization. “Now that we are hiring en masse, it's great to see how someone can start working as a

doorman, and since he has the right skills, he can move into a supervision role in another department.”

Kevin Newman is another example of someone who has grown within Artista over the years. Newman has assisted the company in several different areas, from marketing and branding to sales and operations.

“Mr. K [Kevin Newman] has become one of the most important pieces of this puzzle,” Rodriguez proclaims. “He complements our structure with all of his knowledge. He also adapted very well to our work culture and has a lot of creativity that adds a very unique touch to the products we release.”

As a leader within his organization, Rodriguez always tries to listen to the different opinions and understand the viewpoints from those on his team. He's a firm believer that opposing views and opinions from his team are important to know because they're the ones performing the different tasks and processes that determine the overall success of the business.

“It doesn't matter how many titles or how much knowledge I have; they probably know more,” he confesses. Being direct and as clear as possible to avoid any miscommunication is also something Rodriguez strives to achieve in his leadership role at Artista.

Rodriguez will have to address some other issues threatening his family's business, such as securing enough materials needed for packaging. Supply chain-wise, however, things are looking up. Rodriguez reveals that his company has enough tobacco to work with for at least a decade if not longer, allowing for popular Tabacalera El Artista cigars like Big Papi and Buffalo TEN to remain readily available for years to come and also paving the way for many new blends and releases to hit the market both in the near and far future.

Refreshing the Brand

Tabacalera El Artista has the advantage of having one of the largest raw tobacco operations in the Dominican Republic, which is reflected in the cigar blends it produces. “There is always something new to try: hybrid seeds, tobacco grown in nontraditional regions and imported tobaccos from around the world. I love the challenge of using uncommon tobaccos,” says Rodriguez.

The downside to having access to so much tobacco is that it takes a bit longer to settle on a blend, but the extra work is worth it to Rodriguez, who always enjoys a challenge. To date, Tabacalera El Artista has produced some great blends—such as the Puro Ambar, Pulita, Buffalo TEN and the new Artista Harvest—using uncommon tobaccos. These cigars and others are all put through a smoking panel that includes executives and cigar rollers from the factory. If everyone agrees that what they’re smoking is something special, Rodriguez will give the blend to his father to get his blessing before it’s released to everyone.

The blending process begins with a lot of questions, especially if it’s a blend for someone outside of Tabacalera El Artista. Before any blending begins, the main questions asked relate to the taste profile and transitions that are being looked for from the cigar. After enough questions have been asked and Rodriguez and his team feel as if they have a good framework to work from, blends are created and smoked and graded on what was gathered during the question phase. Feedback is gathered throughout the blending process, and tweaks to the blend are made to get as close to the type of cigar the client came to Tabacalera El Artista in search of.

This is the same process Tabacalera El Artista took with its own products released through what was known as El Artista and is now known simply as Artista Cigars. Earlier this summer, Rodriguez’s company revealed an updated name and new branding. To Rodriguez, the transition from El Artista Cigars to Artista was a natural progression of the company. With this rebranding effort, the aim was to simplify and modernize the visual aesthetic of the company and its products.

“We are known in the industry as Tabacalera El Artista, which is the factory’s name, but we never had a commercial product named after the factory,” says Rodriguez. “We had the idea of releasing a line branded with our name about five years ago, but we were not 100 percent ready at that time. Now we feel that we have enough knowledge of the market and some brand recognition to take this step.

“The new logo is an adaptation of the factory logo, which incorporates the three tobacco leaves, representing the three generations since my grandfather started the factory in 1956. For my family, and for all of us who work at Tabacalera El Artista, the name Artista is so ingrained in our company culture we had to make it the prominent feature. As our flagship line, we wanted to make sure that this new brand had the quality and consistency our company is known for in a package that stands out on the shelf and in the mind.”

“For the Artista lines, we challenged ourselves to make something different,” says Kevin Newman, vice president of Artista Cigars. “We spoke with our factory team and worked with our agronomist and asked them to seek new materials, source often overlooked tobaccos and asked our best artisans to help us develop something wholly different.”

Artista Harvest is a medium-bodied blend that features a top-grade Sumatra wrapper, flavorful Habano Seco binder and proprietary Dominican filler. Sporting a yellow and gold color scheme, the Artista Harvest’s flavor profile consists of rich honey, spice, elderberry, and cashew and almond notes. The Artista Midnight, presented in a dark blue box, is a full-bodied cigar with a dark Ecuadorian Habano wrapper. The cigar’s Ecuadorian Connecticut Shade binder gives the cigar a sweet edge, while the Nicaraguan, Dominican and U.S.-grown filler tobaccos give it deep, rich, earthy notes of coffee, spice and chestnuts. The Artista Midnight is topped off by a citrus finish. Both cigars are available in 20-count boxes and come in two different box-pressed sizes: a 5 x 54 Robusto and a 6 x 50 Toro. The MSRP per cigar is \$10.20 for the Robusto and \$10.40 for the Toro vitola.

For the already established brands in Artista’s portfolio, Rodriguez and



As part of its new rebranding and brand strategy, Artista Cigars introduced several new cigar lines at this year’s Premium Cigar Association trade show: a new master brand, Artista, that represents the factory’s premium and future super-premium blends, and Paperboy, which is a more fun and experimental brand.

his team saw a need to divide them into different series to help retailers and consumers better understand the different products available to them. Going forward, the Artista Series will be the company's flagship line. The Rugged Country Series includes Artista's Fugly Cheroots, Cimarron and Buffalo TEN brands. The David Ortiz Series will include Big Papi, the Slugger and anything else released under Ortiz's name. Pulita, Puro Ambar and Exactus all fall under the Factory Classic Series as they are the company's heritage lines and have a unique story and ties to the factory's history.

"While new releases will be limited to the Artista line, we will continue to support, produce and promote all the other lines. These brands have been adopted by our community, and it's our duty to continue supporting them through the years," Rodriguez explains.

Even though the Artista Series is a modern and sophisticated interpretation and representation of the Tabacalera El Artista operation, Rodriguez and his team felt there was still something missing from its portfolio. To explore its "wild side," Rodriguez decided to extend the scope of its Artista Studio Works (ASW) program to include cigars.

"ASW gives us the creativity and flexibility to create anything that doesn't necessarily fit into any of the series mentioned before," says Rodriguez.

Until recently, ASW showcased Dominican artists who produced cigar-inspired artworks and goods, such as humidors and wall art. The ASW platform will continue to support artists but will now also serve as a creative outlet for Rodriguez and his company's cigar blending team. The first of their releases through Artista Studio Works has already been revealed to be the ASW Paperboy, a newspaper-wrapped bundle of eight Petite Corona cigars.

The ASW Paperboy, presented as a 4 x 44 Petite Corona, is available in two wrappers: Ecuadorian Connecticut Shade and San Andres Maduro. As part of the creative and wild side of the release, the newspaper that wraps the bundles will include wild stories of factory folklore and other made-up stories all written in Spanish. The ASW Paperboy began shipping to retailers in August of this year.

Learning from the Past

Much has changed since Rodriguez first started in the tobacco industry. As a teenager, he didn't feel connected to the industry and didn't understand the appeal of cigars. It wasn't until he gained more experience that he understood why his father and grandfather both made careers for themselves within the tobacco industry and the legacy he was being entrusted with. He may not have understood what he was getting into back in 2017, but today, he feels like he and his company are operating in a much more professional and mature manner. In addition to experience, time also gives someone like Rodriguez insight into the end customer that can in turn help make products even better.

"Today, the consumer has much more knowledge than before, and feedback spreads faster in social media. I feel people are looking for products with outstanding value, quality and consistency," he shares.

Something Rodriguez has learned over the years while building up Tabacalera El Artista and its various other business divisions is that there is always a different way to achieve what's desired. The solution to most problems is not dependent on one person but oftentimes should help solve many people's problems at once. That also ties into Rodriguez's definition of success: It's achieved when you and all of the parties involved are able to achieve what everyone desires.

As Tabacalera El Artista, Artista Cigars and TCD Logistics all continue to grow, Rodriguez has never lost sight of what matters most to him: his family. Even with a busy schedule and working most days of the week, he



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still prioritizes his family and gives them all the free time that he has. He tries to be as flexible with his schedule as possible so that he won't miss any important moments or events with his family. Every big achievement and accomplishment he has in business is done in honor of his family.

Rodriguez's father taught him the importance of family and business and to this day serves as a big influence on his life and career. One of the best pieces of business advice that sticks with Rodriguez came from his father: "Let your words be more valuable than your pocket because money comes and goes, but words stay. Make sure you deliver what you promise."

In order to succeed in business, you have to be open to learning from your mistakes—that's another revelation from Rodriguez as he looks back at his experiences in the tobacco industry thus far. Perhaps the most important lesson learned is that with cigars, quality comes from the tobacco used in the blends and the people responsible for seeing that tobacco progress from seed to a finished cigar product. Happy and well taken care of employees will always produce the best cigars on the market. Thus, if you want your cigar or tobacco business to flourish in today's market, take a page out of Rodriguez's book and take a personal approach to how you run your business. **TB**