



Interview

COFFEE IS OUR LOVE LANGUAGE

MARIUS MELEȘTEU, CEO, STRAUSS ROMANIA

1. At last month's edition of the CEO Conference, where you were a speaker, you mentioned that the main ideas leaders should take away are the need for immediate action and optimism. Could you elaborate starting from these ideas?

A leader should, by default, be a courageous optimist. Innovating in the short term and generating resources to ensure the development of a growth platform in the long term, considering a trade-off to move resources from less productive areas to those with greater potential, having the courage to use current success, such as the launch of new products are strategic bets much need it in order not to miss opportunities and become irrelevant in the long term.

2. Strauss Romania has strong consumer brand equity in a highly emotional category like coffee. What principles guide your approach to brand storytelling in such a competitive market?

The foundation for our relationship with consumers was set long time ago. Relevant positioning centered in our values, tackling authenticity in personalization, quality and ability to make a difference, are the pillars of everything we are doing, not only in relation with consumers, but also with clients, employees and collaborators.

Our brands are different, solving real tensions rooted in this modern life, and, due to the specificity of the category, either helping consumer to have a moment for

themselves (Doncafe-Me Moment), or for a fast and serious energy "shot" (Amigo -Energy, not words).

3. Beyond product innovation, what ecosystem partnerships (start-ups, gastronomy, technology platforms, sustainability labs) do you see as most promising for driving category growth?

Everything that succeeds to excite and improve the coffee experience is more than welcome at the table. The main driver for coffee market growth lies in consumer need. The need for energy to keep them going in this overactive world, the need for pause and relaxation, the need for a social ignition and the basic instinct to experiment tastes, ways of preparations and moments of consumptions. Our partnership with artisans like Alex Niculae (World Coffee Roast Champion) to launch Doncafe Supremo, maximize the presence in all on-line platforms with dedicated brands like Beans Republic or our moral joint-venture with coffee machines renowned producers, are initiative that overpass the regular innovation process in a very consistent way.

4. Many FMCG companies are integrating cross-category collaborations. Could you share some partnerships already developed by Strauss Romania? How do you view the future of in-store presence, merchandising standards, and retailer collaboration?



Being a 360 degrees company, we are always looking beyond FMCG brands. We are actively collaborating with coffee machine producers (professional or consumer) in order to develop the coffee experience and the quality of the product inside the cup. We are proud to have many collaborations and I would mention Dr. Coffee and Nova Simonelli.

On another register, brick and mortar stores are here to stay. The shopping experience is different, more emotional, fulfilling a different need versus the on-line one. On the long term consumers will look for quality, diversity, assortment and novelty. We have a great relationship with retailers because we always strive to understand their needs and the common focus is consumer satisfaction. Their clients are our consumers. And vice versa.

5. Beyond taste and cost, what emerging value propositions do you see influencing consumer preference for coffee brands in Romania in the next five years?

The future value proposition in the coffee

industry is shifting towards a blend of health and wellness, sustainability and ethics, and high-quality, customizable experiences. Consumers are increasingly looking for coffee that offers functional benefits beyond taste, in all categories, sourced transparently and ethically, that provides a personalized, premium experience, whether through advanced brewing methods or enhanced customer service and automation.

6. As a CEO, how do you maintain organizational agility when scaling both brand equity and operational efficiency - two areas that often push in different directions?

I have to disagree. They are pushing in the same direction.

Operational efficiency is about allocating resources toward the segments that have more potential in the long term. This will fuel the innovation and the modern brands need innovation. You know, we have a list of equity statements in our consumer tracker research, since the beginning. The line "It is a modern, innovative brand" is very important for us.



Our strategic goal is to build deep consumers attachment to our brands, similar to interpersonal love, characterized by passion, trust, and a strong positive, emotional connection.

7. Coffee is often associated with well-being, mindfulness, and mental performance. Coffee culture is also evolving rapidly across Europe. Which global micro-trends do you believe will penetrate the Romanian market first—specialty experiences, functional coffee, experiential retail, or something else?

Romania is a highly permeable market: everything that is developed in more advanced countries is reaching our market amazingly fast. We already have an extraordinarily strong league of artisans and specialty coffee producers.

The future is to democratize the roasting at the level of the modern stores (micro-roasting) for a fresh experience. The consumers need to engage with coffee brands for a better understanding of sustainability in sourcing will not only be about the coffee, but also packaging, transportation , cups (reusable) and ethical workforce. Extending coffee beyond the regular category will improve the impact of this category also.

8. As automation and AI become more common in consumer research, how do you ensure that human insight – emotion, ritual, tradition – remains central in decision-making?

Doing both.

Again, the market is driven by emotions. The need is also emotional.

What we can improve is addressing habits and rituals in a different way because at the center of the coffee moments is a person with feelings. And here the big brands play the most important role.

9. From a leadership perspective, how do you cultivate innovative thinking in an industry with deeply established rituals and habits?

When you are thinking from consumer perspective, you see that it is not at all a traditional market. Consumers are always challenging us: new needs, new ways of preparation, different taste, convenience, fresh etc. This is the beauty of the category: you are always challenged by consumers and this fact keeps us agile , oriented toward innovation.

10. Finally, what do you believe will be the most important differentiator for coffee brands in Romania by 2030 – product, experience, ecosystem, sustainability, personalization, or something we’re not yet discussing?

The most important differentiators for the coffee industry in the future will be sustainability and traceability, coupled with a focus on personalized and convenient consumer experiences. Consumers are increasingly demanding ethical and eco-friendly practices, while also seeking products that cater to individual tastes and are easy to access.

