

Leaders & Success



Antonio Pasin Steered Radio Flyer Red Wagons Upward

BY SONJA CARBERRY, FOR INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY
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Antonio Pasin grew up near Venice, Italy, moved to America when he was 16 and by the 1920s was building wooden wagons that inspired customers. Radio... [View Enlarged Image](#)

One big push.

That's what [Radio Flyer](#) CEO Antonio Pasin pondered for his fledgling wagon business.

By 1930, his wheeled toys had made inroads with American consumers, and his factory turned out 1,500 a day. But amid the Great Depression, company cohorts urged a conservative approach.

That's not how Pasin (1897-1990) rolled.

With bravado and savvy business maneuvers, the Italian carpenter cornered the market with his iconic red wagon. Many decades

thereafter, the company boasted that 75% of U.S. families had owned a Radio Flyer.

Starting out, Pasin knew he had to make a bold move.

The 1933 World's Fair, "A Century of Progress," was coming to Chicago — Radio Flyer's home — and he envisioned a wild ride.

To gain momentum, Pasin took a huge risk with the firm's finances as well as his own.

"He took out a big loan, and he'd never done that before," Robert Pasin, Antonio's grandson and Radio Flyer's current CEO, told IBD.

With \$30,000 — nearly a half-million dollars in today's money — Antonio Pasin hired an art-deco designer and commissioned a 45-foot structure. His towering "Coaster Boy" depicted a giant youth

Pasin's Keys

- Popularized little red wagons during the Great Depression by making them fun

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kneeling in a Radio Flyer — one hand steering the wagon, the other bracing for adventure.

Price Was Right

At street level, the edifice opened into a gift shop where fairgoers could purchase souvenir-sized Radio Flyers for 25 cents (worth \$4.50 today).

Kids clamored for the keepsakes, and the company sold more than 120,000 — enough to repay the loan in full. "We feel like that was the watershed event," Robert Pasin said. "All the eyes of the world were on Chicago."

The white-knuckled journey paid off for the Italian immigrant.

"That was the only time my grandmother saw him stressed out in any way. That was the big one," Robert Pasin said.

Antonio described his bold approach this way:

"I enter so many ventures in business with more nerve than capital."

Eight decades later, the little red wagon remains a childhood rite of passage.

"It's a quintessential American toy. It's become synonymous with America," said Christopher Byrne, content director of [Time to Play Magazine](#) and author of "Toy Time! From Hula Hoops to He-Man to Hungry Hungry Hippos: A Look Back at the Most-Beloved Toys of Decades Past."

Pasin made the wagon affordable — less than \$3 dollars in 1930, or \$40 in today's currency — so every boy and girl could have one.

The return on investment for parents? A toy with uses as boundless as a kid's daydreams.

"It became a catalyst for the imagination," Byrne said. "It became synonymous with childhood freedom."

Pasin knew a thing or two about daydreaming. "Since I was 10 years old, I wanted to be in business for myself," he said.

Born in Rosa, an Italian town near Venice, he learned cabinet-making from his father and grandfather. The elder Pasins did carpentry work at a palatial Italian estate.

As a youth, Antonio helped them craft an indoor carousel, complete with hand-carved horses. "He was exposed early to quality and beauty," Robert Pasin said. "Design was so central to everything he did."

In 1914, the Pasin family sold a mule to pay for 16-year-old Antonio's voyage to America — the land of promise, they felt. But arriving in New York City was more like a nightmare.

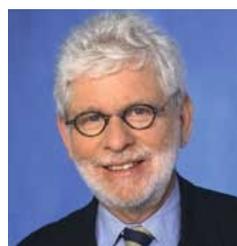
Pasin's wife, Anna, described it in a corporate video: "He got off the boat with no money, no friends, nobody. He came to this country and nobody gave him a job because he was too young."

Pasin made his way to Chicago, where he found work hauling water for sewer-digging crews.

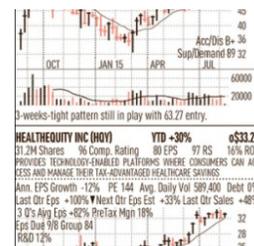
and affordable. Decades later, 75% of American households still owned a Radio Flyer.

- Overcame: Competitors via energetic promotion.
- Lesson: Beat them all in price, value and appeal.
- "I enter so many ventures in business with more nerve than capital."

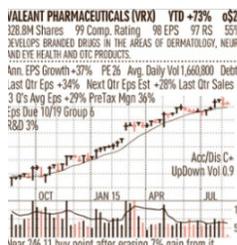
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"It was a few years of successively getting better jobs," grandson Robert said.

By 1917, Pasin had saved enough money to buy tools and rent a one-room shop where he built phonograph cabinets.

Sales trickled in, but what really caught the fancy of customers was the wooden wagon that Pasin built to haul tools around his workshop.

"People kept ordering the wagon," Robert said. "Eventually, he just went with his best-seller."

The Italian immigrant who was born on the Fourth of July dubbed it the Liberty Coaster — a nod to the statue that had greeted him in New York — and sales rolled in.

By 1923, he had several employees at his bustling company.

But Pasin didn't coast. His mind always sped toward the horizon.

"He was into what was modern, what was new," Robert said.

What was especially new was Henry Ford's assembly line. Fired up by the carmaker's manufacturing innovations, Pasin toyed with metal stamping as a way to mass-produce his wagon.

Plugged-In Pasin

"He was a very technical guy. He was very into how the product was made," Robert said. "When he saw the metal-stamping technology, he thought: Oh my gosh, I could use this. He went after it full-bore."

Using scrap pieces, Pasin made a metal version of his wagon and dubbed it the Radio Flyer. The catchy phrase captured the two hottest innovations of the time — radio and commercial flight.

Pasin opened a metal-stamping factory in Chicago and changed his company's name from Liberty Coaster to Radio Steel & Manufacturing in 1930. An order for 7,000 wagons put the business in motion.

With a toehold on the market, Pasin put everything into his product — "the only wagon that outsells Ford station wagons," according to a company advertisement.

"His approach was: Let's keep the price low and the margin low, and let's not invite a lot of competition," Robert said.

Pasin wanted rivals scratching their heads, wondering how he made a profit on such a reasonably priced product.

One secret was business relationships. "He knew all the steel dealers," Robert said. "If someone had metal scrap to unload, he'd get there first and buy it at some crazy low price."

Sellers were happy to oblige the personable, nattily dressed gentleman with an Italian accent.

"His word was his bond," Robert said. "People loved him and trusted him."

Especially enamored were new immigrants who found a fresh start and a first American job with the gregarious Pasin.

Happy With New Americans

"It always gave him a lot of pride," said Robert. "He was incredibly generous with his time, his money and his advice."

Pasin put it this way: "To give work to others. That had something to do with my



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desire to be in business."

When World War II put the brakes on the wagon biz, Radio Flyer shifted production to the 5-gallon steel Blitz cans that GIs used to tote fuel and water.

"He made that product because it was well suited to the equipment we had," Robert said.

In 1945, the company received an Army-Navy E Award for excellence in producing essential wartime materials.

The military further tapped Pasin for hands-on help during the war. "He became somebody that they would use to go in and certify the factories," Robert said. "He and his team knew what they were doing."

The patriarch steered the company until 1967, when he turned the CEO chair over to his son, Mario, giving him permission to make, in the younger man's words, "a ton of mistakes."

When Mario passed the company on to sons Robert and Paul in 1997, he repeated the same advice.

What would Antonio, who died in 1990 at age 93, have thought of the company's move that decade into plastic wagons — a shift forced by competition?

"My grandfather was not nostalgic whatsoever. He would believe in changing with the times," Robert said. "He would say: Of course it needs a cup holder."

Radio Flyer's sales pegged \$100 million going into 2013, according to the management journal Smart Business Chicago, after dipping as low as \$20 million in the early '90s.

Robert Pasin calls himself the company's chief wagon officer and continues to follow his grandfather's advice:

"Stay close to the consumer and know what they want."

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