



”THERE ARE NO FAILURES, THERE ARE ONLY EXPERIENCES!”

An exclusive interview with

Olivier Schaeren (CEO of Smile Line, Switzerland)

and Marat Awdaljan

START OF CAREER

Can you tell me who Olivier Schaeren is? (background information/personal anecdotes)

I am the second of a family with two sisters. I was born as my parents had their own representation of life and freedom, so I spent my early childhood living in a trailer. Things changed as I was six and coming back from kindergarten with too many questions so my parents decided to move into an apartment.
As a teenager, I had no special passion for studies (maybe I was also a bit lazy at that time) so I decided to choose the way of apprenticeship that is also a respected option in Switzerland. This apprenticeship had nothing to do with the dental field, actually, the office where I was working was taking care of the ads in newspapers. At the end of my apprenticeship, I decided to spend some time learning some German and some English. At my return from three months’ stay in the UK, I had no job, and luckily, quickly I found a job as a junior sales representative at a dental dealer, and this is how I met the dental field. I was 19.

How did you decide to become an entrepreneur?

That was more by accident than a real choice. When I was 24, I was rather successful in my job as a sales rep and was making quite a lot of money. The point is that I had a very expensive passion – I was a rally driver and all my income was spent on that sport. When I say all my income, I mean I was naive and didn’t realize that one day I would have had to pay income taxes. And indeed, one day they came with a huge bill – while I had absolutely no money left! This happened right after a very severe car rally accident that left me in a wheelchair for a couple of months... with a lot of time for thinking of my future. A friend told me that in the Swiss law there is a rule saying that when you change your status (from an employee to self-employed) ...the state forgets about all due taxes for focusing only on the new financial situation. So good for me! Well, there were also other reasons but this economic issue met was probably a heavy argument for the kick-off of my own business.
Needless to say, that because of another rule in the Swiss law…in the end I had to pay my taxes!!!

What was your motivation to become an entrepreneur and choose this path of career?

I believe you would have a similar answer from many entrepreneurs. Actually, it is not so much a point of motivation but a point of your character… in French,

the verb "entreprendre" means take decisions and act,

it is not necessarily tied with the fact of owning a company. So, either you are an entrepreneur (have ideas, take decisions and act) or you prefer letting others take this role. In my case, I would say that I was an entrepreneur already as a child: when I wanted something special I had no other choice but manage all alone.

Where did you learn about the dental profession?

I was young when I started as a rep in the dental field. My employer was a "generalist" dental dealer. I remember that during the first months, my task was more to memorize the brands, the names of thousands of products, prices and references. Very quickly I understood it was better to take an order for 30oz Dispersalloy to send by post rather than an order for two 25kg bags of Moldano plaster that I had to carry personally to a lab on the fourth floor of a building without elevator!

It took a few months until I started getting interested in the use of what I was selling. We often say "learning by doing" – in this case, it was "learning by asking". Most customers were always so nice and very happy to explain what for they need this or that, what is the advantage of product X vs Y. Actually, the curiosity and interest in techniques played a major role during all my professional career.

Who were your mentors on your journey of getting to where you are now?

I would not talk of mentors literally. It is rather that I have been inspired by others' results and experiences. For example, I remember the wonderful experience of Belle de St-Claire of Robert Berger (a line that I was selling actively and successfully), I also remember the incredible enthusiasm of friends, technicians when Willi Geller's porcelain was about to be launched on the market. I was impressed and attracted by those brands that are either so smart with the products they develop or raising passion thanks to the image they present. As you ask me this question, I realize that I especially observed other experiences in the dental field (my reality, our small industry) and not the worldwide successes in other fields of activities.

What do you consider as the biggest achievement in your career?

This is an easy and a difficult question at the same time. I am, of course, very happy and proud to have created from scratch a brand that is today known and respected by professionals all over the world. The opinion of the industry is, certainly, important but it is

when I see the passion and faithfulness of the users that emotions are the strongest.

Another amazing reward is the unique and strong relationship we could establish with many of our dealers and with amazing, so nice and smart people, KOLs or not, all around the world. Finally, the great partnership we could build with the community StyleItaliano is a huge satisfaction for me and certainly one of Smile Line's biggest achievements in the last few years.



WORK/BUSINESS

How did you decide to start Smile Line and what were your first steps there?

When I left my employer, first I created my own company as a tiny dental dealer, selling only a selection of high-end specialties to the dental labs in Switzerland (Shofu, Belle de St-Claire, Cato etc.). I frequently organized porcelain hands-on courses with Jan Kaech (dental technician in Thun). We became great friends and Jan has been our pilot and reference lab for more than 25 years. It was under his impulse, telling me his dream to have a porcelain tray able to do "this + this + this" that I started developing and testing materials for trying to match his needs. The result was the U-mid porcelain tray that very quickly became a huge success. That very first product was the reason why Smile Line was created.

What was the main idea and purpose of Smile Line?

People often say: "Wow, you had an amazing plan 25 years ago!".This makes me laugh because there was no plan, there was no idea in the beginning. Try to figure out if you can say with precision where you will be and what you will be doing and with what success in ten years. If we could do that, we would all be very successful... with minimum effort and minimum mistakes!

I am afraid the reality for Smile Line is a lot simpler: I put a lot of passion and energy into the development of one single product... and let's see what happens. It is, of course, easier to tell the story as a retrospective and my guess is, it is the same for many companies. Smile Line started with a unique product, the U-mid porcelain tray. Then with the months and years passing, more and more products were developed.

As we all have a talent, I guess I have the talent of putting things and people together (a huge advantage when it is about developing something) plus I probably have the talent or feeling for aesthetics that, with the years, allowed Smile Line to project the image and values it has today.

What are the core values of the company?

I believe that when it is about core values, there are two points:

1 - the core values that are visible and communicated to the public because we all have to identify ourselves.

In this case, for Smile Line we are talking about

exclusivity, emotion, innovation, design, high quality.

2 - the other core values I am talking about are the ones that are experimented by a customer when, for a reason or another, he has direct contact with Smile Line. At this stage, the "deep" core values that he will probably experience and feel are

respect, authenticity, service, politeness and follow-up.

How do you see the future of Smile line?

As you know, for more than 15 years, Smile Line was 100% and exclusively focusing on dental lab tools and accessories. Some 7-8 years ago we were contacted by the world's largest dental community: StyleItaliano *(styleitaliano.org)* founded by Prof. Angelo Putignano and Dr. Walter Devoto. From that meeting started a very nice and efficient partnership: Smile Line developing products based on StyleItaliano's members' ideas.

Smile Line was very lucky to meet StyleItaliano probably at a key moment of its life, which allowed us to open the door of the dental office market.

Of course, Smile Line continues and will continue to develop specifically for the dental laboratories but due to the drastic changes in our industry, we will have to invest more and more into developments for the dental offices.

What product(s) are you proud of as the owner of Smile Line?

Actually, there are many, all the ones for which Smile Line was a pioneer on the market. Spontaneously I have in my mind products like the U-mid tray and porcelain palettes in general, the Smile Lite MDP or the VeneerME.

Another line of product which I am proud of is INSTRUMENT by Smile Line that allows custom-tailoring instruments/tools that are so exclusive, with a high emotional value and out of the highest quality. I imagined and developed this line without having any background as a designer, and with it, Smile Line was granted the very prestigious Red Dot Design Award.

But if I had to select only one point that I am really proud of, it is the fact that Smile Line was again pioneering in searching and offering unique alternatives to the use of animals (kolinsky red sables) for producing high-quality porcelain brushes. We started with N.era brushes and launched the new series RSPCT last year. Both lines are growing every year and count more and more users. I must say that this gives me very deep satisfaction.

Did you have mentors or role models in your business?

Many, actually. As I explained before, my background is rather basic. Over the years, with all the projects I led, I was superficially involved in so many different technologies. As I am not a specialist, I always had to rely on a person who was mastering the topic or the technique in which I was interested. In most of the cases, these meetings opened the door to an amazing relationship or friendship for which I am so grateful. So indeed, for this reason, during my career I had many mentors

What are your strategies to maintain effective communication?

In my opinion, communication is becoming a challenge today. Sometimes it may look like a fight between traditional media like printed catalogues etc. vs. the internet and social networks. It is dramatic for me to hear that even some famous Swiss watch brands decided not to print any catalogues anymore but all focus on the internet and social media.
I must say that

I still prefer having a book in my hands rather than a tablet.

It is important for me to continue offering paper supports, hence the brand new and exclusive hard-cover booklet dedicated to INSTRUMENT by Smile Line that was launched a couple of months ago. My opinion is that while paper is a support for emotions and dreams, social media are just a fast succession of images replaced by other images.
If I may say: as long as I have the choice, I will always prefer eating in a good restaurant rather than in a fast-food.
I believe there is the same phenomen for Labline: when people receive it, they make a break, they restart breathing normally and get out of stress and emergency. This is very important to my eyes
Said this, I think it is mandatory to be also present in today's media, of course.





What is/are the biggest need(s) in dentistry/dental technology at this moment?

It depends if we talk about the humans' point of view or about the business point of view. I place myself on the humans' point of view for saying that

it is urgent to communicate better towards the public, the patients.

People should know what it is about, who is making their crown, where, how and in what conditions. In my opinion, this is for the best of the technician and, in the end, for the best of the patient. Just like I prefer shopping at the local butcher shop and bakery, I would not be happy with impersonal and global dentistry.

What do you think about the growing importance of digital dentistry and manual working process?

Digital dentistry has now been part of our life for years and there is obviously no possible come-back to old techniques. I know many technicians of my generation or older and am amazed by how quickly they swapped from artisan work to a new job assisted by computers and machines.
We are all aware that before digital dentistry we could see all kinds of qualities on the market, from the poorest quality to the highest one. Knowing this, I believe that the new technologies were positive for raising and improving the average level of quality. So, we could observe a first huge change from analogue to digital dentistry. I am worried that the change today is digital dentistry owned by big companies that will take more and more space in the dental landscape.
In spite of this,

I am confident that there will remain a good place for talented technicians

to continue offering highly personalized services, kind of haute couture dentistry. Communication and teamwork with the clinician will be determining for this.

Smile Line is known as having a high standard. How do you manage to keep the quality high?

I think it is a matter of production scale. Smile Line is really a small entity – we are just 14 colleagues. The way we work and produce is more like artisans than like an industry. It means that we always have all the steps of production under control. We are working with some 120-130 subcontractors producing components after our drawings and sketches, and at Smile Line every single part always comes for control before being sent out again for additional treatment or before being mounted. In the end, 100% of the products are mounted and conditioned in our facilities in St-Imier. As long as we produce based on that model, we will be able to keep the same level of quality.

Do you have tips/tricks for young entrepreneurs on starting a company?

I love this sentence of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, which I used in the foreword of the last Smile Line catalogue:

"The future is not what is going to happen to us but what we are going to do".

It tells it all: things will definitely not come by themselves, I learned and experienced that as I was a kid.

What are the qualities a leader must have to manage a team successfully?

Successfully... do you mean "for the success of the company" or "for being a leader appreciated by his team"? These may be completely different. For my part, it is natural and obvious to have the same respect for my apprentice as for our most important customer.
This reminds me of a story that happened many years ago at the Lab Day in Chicago. Try to figure out the aisles very crowded while I was at a booth, demonstrating a product to a customer. Suddenly, Jim Glidewell himself arrived with several colleagues. Almost everybody stopped breathing, very impressed. I had not paid attention and a colleague whispered to me: "Mr. Glidewell wants to talk to you". I said: "Yes, with pleasure but let me finish my demo that takes another 5 minutes". And my colleague said, starting to sweat: "But it is Mr. Glidewell !!". I repeated that I was finished within 5', the time for me to finish with my customer who was deserving the same respect, so Mr. Glidewell would have to wait a bit. And of course that was absolutely fine for Mr. Glidewell!
This is just for saying that to my eyes,

respect is a quality in life and for sure a quality when you have to manage a team.

What are the biggest lessons that you have learned in your career as an entrepreneur?

It is humans' nature to talk and communicate. In business especially, many people talk a lot. Too much. In my opinion, there is often a huge waste of time and energy. It is

a challenge to understand what is worth listening to

and what is not and step back for going your way.

What is your perspective on innovation?

I think we can say that innovation is part of Smile Line's DNA. I invite you to check our complete portfolio and you will see that for most of the products Smile Line was the pioneer.
Innovation goes beyond the products themselves. Smile Line also innovated with brand image, with the way to present products in a catalogue and even with the wordings or product descriptions. Others have inspired themselves a lot from Smile Line, but with no possible doubt, I can assert that Smile Line was a pioneer on our market for that too.

How frequently do you decide to come up with a new innovative product to the market?

There is no rule and it depends on the importance of the project. I would say that Smile Line launches on average 3-5 new products every year.

When and how do you know if a product is fit for the market?

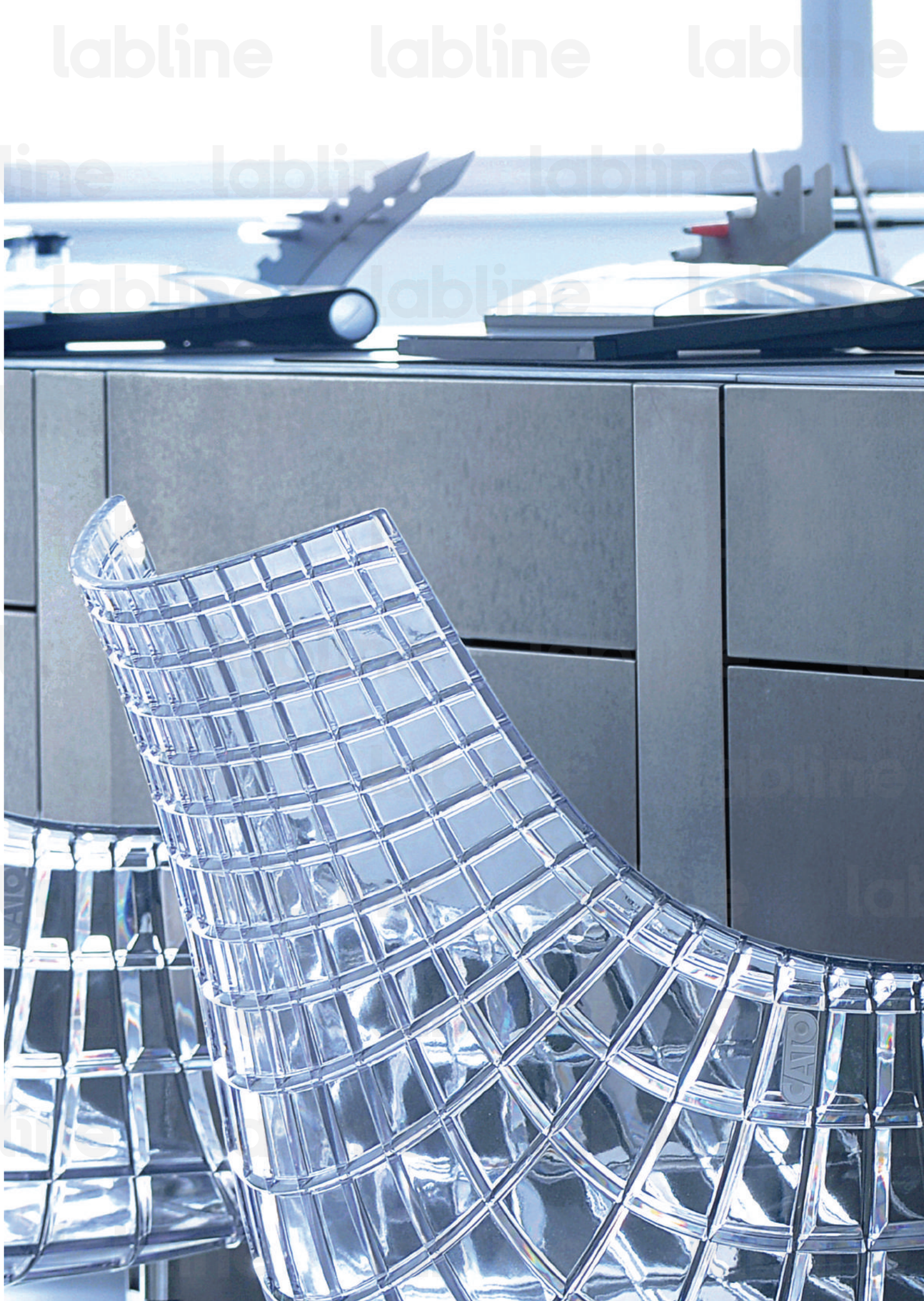
It normally takes just a couple of months. The sign for us is the enthusiasm of the sales reps after a few visits at their customers.

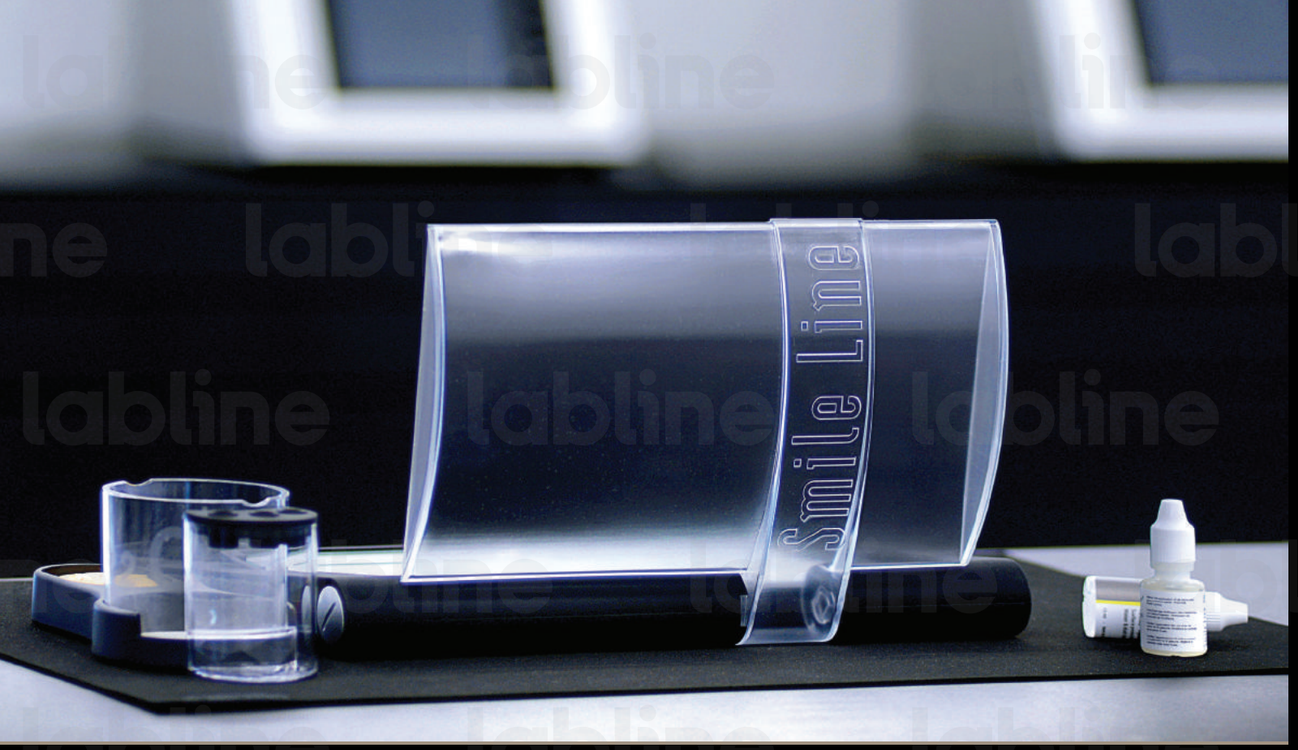
Does Smile Line focus more on dental technicians or dentists?

Today it is about 50/50. Dentist's side grew drastically thanks to the great partnership we have with StyleItaliano.

How do you become an official distributor of Smile Line? Are there any specific criteria?

We have a distributor of our brand in more than 70 countries. Official distributors with whom we work all showed great motivation and passion in the beginning: a willingness to work actively, show and demonstrate the products rather than just having them available in their warehouse.





PHILOSOPHY

Do you have any daily rituals? (Morning rituals/ success rituals)

I would not talk of a ritual but certainly, I have a daily rhythm that is good for my physical and mental balance. Every morning I start at 6.00 am. I am lucky to live very close to the company so I have a quick lunch at home with my family, then I go back to the office normally until 5.00 pm, then I visit the gym club for an hour before going back home and having my evening with my family.

What do you like to do in your free time? Do you have any hobbies?

I have two older kids, 23 and 20 years old, who are much independent today. I am married a second time and with my wife, Marielle, we have two sweet little girls, 6 and 3 years old. So I like to spend time with my family. Almost every evening I am the cook for them.
In summer I love climbing the mountains with my mountain bike, and when I have time I love practising kitesurf. I wish I could do more but unfortunately, this happens only 1-2 times per year. In winter I like skiing – last year I experienced ski touring for the first time, and I guess I will quickly become addicted.

What books/training would you recommend?

Conversations with God – Neale Donald Walsch

What is your ultimate vision in life?

I am much worried about how the world goes today with everything speeding up, pollution, nature destruction, big data, globalization. Maybe I'm old fashioned maybe I'm romantic but I would like to see things slow down.
Slow down so we have more time.
Time for stepping back and appreciating things, time for meeting people and not always postpone because we are too busy. I doubt that the world will change in that direction. But maybe I can re-design my own universe in that sense the day when I am retired ha-ha.

What are your goals in life?

From a personal aspect, I would like
all my children to be safe, happy and healthy
– this is the most important. From a professional point of view, I would like
Smile Line to continue working and being successful
for many years with the same philosophy.

What is the best advice you have ever gotten and followed?

Have faith.
Simply. Because if you don't have faith, it is very difficult to be creative, very difficult to undertake things and projects.

What is your perception of failure?

Someone said:
"There are no failures, there are only experiences".
In a sense this is true, and once you admit it, you are likely to be less quickly discouraged by these... experiences. So they can be the opportunity to restart in a different way... or the sign that you are wasting your time.

Is there a quote that you live your life by, or you often think of?

Yes, something I tell to others ...but that I can rarely apply for myself: "Calm down, we'll all arrive at Xmas at the same time!"

CONCLUSION

If you had the opportunity to do this all again, what would you do differently in your life?

I would do all the same but worry less. I experienced that almost 99% of the worries are problems that get solved easily or by themselves.

If this was your last day on earth, what would you like to share with the world?

I'd spend that last day talking about good memories with the people I love, having good wines and food.



Marat Awdaljan is a dental ceramist born in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 1988 to Armenian parents. In 1993, his family moved to the Netherlands, where he grew up. Since 2013, he is the founder of a project, during which he travels the world to meet the Masters in dentistry in order to find answers to all the questions and problems in the dental field. Interviews with the Masters are published in the world-renowned Labline Magazine. Combining the knowledge of this journey with the extended research he is currently focusing on, Marat has created and developed MATISSE, The Universal Shade Matching Software for dentists and dental technicians and he gives lectures and courses worldwide.