GAME CHANGERS: ALBERTO BICHI



Sporting goods manufacturers are affected by scandals

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Our Game Changers feature focuses on someone who mostly works behind the scenes on behalf of the sporting goods industry, Alberto Bichi, secretary general of Brussels-based lobbying body FESI. He became more prominent at the end of 2016 when he announced that his organisation was making sporting integrity one of its top priorities.

What is FESI?

It's the Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry, a representative body for manufacturers of sporting goods. We carry out reactive lobbying, screening and working hard to understand new legislative initiatives when the European Union (EU) puts them in place. We also engage in proactive lobbying, trying to make sure policy-makers are attentive to our sector and trying to encourage citizens to become more physically active. Thirdly, we push our member companies to be innovative to help encourage investment in our industry.

Is FESI alone in carrying out this work?

Far from it. We work in partnership with health and fitness association EuropeActive, with the International Centre for Sports and Security (ICSS), with the European Platform for Sport Innovation (EPSI) and others. Twenty

Underpinning the work of FESI and its partners is a desire to encourage all Europeans to make being active part of their lifestyles.

Dominic Zimmermann/ Zimtstern



FESI secretary general, Alberto Bichi, says he has been "personally shocked" by the series of corruption scandals at sporting bodies in recent years. He has served on panels and addressed the European Commission on sporting integrity with high-ranking representatives of sports bodies who were later accused of corruption.

Bartosz Brzezinski

associations came together under one umbrella in Brussels in 2015 and formed the House of Sport. A common denominator is that we all want to push EU citizens to be more active.

What is your background? How did you come to the role of FESI general secretary?

My background is in economics. I have had quite an international career: I'm an Italian national, but I was raised in the Netherlands, my step-mother is German and I went to a French school and to the UK for part of my university education. Since completing my studies I have worked as one of the 7,000 lobbyists that there are in Brussels. I have been managing FESI since 2000.

To return to the innovation aspect and EPSI, is the sports industry in Europe striking the right balance between innovative product, which is to say good ideas coming from European sports people and companies, and the retail aspect of the sports industry, which seems to be more about sourcing cheaply and selling for the biggest profit possible?

It's important not to generalise. Around 85% of FESI members are small or medium enterprises (SMEs), but there are big corporations too and we have to recognise that corporations have shareholders' needs to meet, and that's not always the case with family-owned SMEs. Our members are strong on innovation, but by that I mean pre-competitive innovation rather than the really competitive aspects. Companies joining forces at a pre-competitive layer adds value; this is something the automotive industry, for example, understood a long time ago. There's a strategic research and innovation agenda at EPSI level, which provides guidance on mega-trends and helps chief executives work out where best to invest their research budgets.

What response do you give to those who argue that too much money from the sporting goods industry goes on sponsoring organisations and individuals who have failed to uphold sporting integrity?

Scandals at the level of governing bodies have been very disappointing and they affect the entire sector. They need to take responsibility and answer for all the misbehaviour. When members of the sporting goods industry become sponsors for events, associations, teams or athletes they should specify in the contract that the money has to be spent well. The misbehaviour is very concerning. I have been personally shocked by it. I have sat beside people on panels formed to address the European Commission on sporting integrity only for some panel members to be accused of corruption. This is behaviour that threatens our sector.

What can FESI and its partners do to help restore sporting integrity?

We are tackling this very strongly. We opened a new work stream at the 2016 FESI general assembly in Rome in November, which means integrity will be a top priority in our new three-year plan. In collaboration with the World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industry, we are working with different partners on this, including a new group called the Sporting Integrity Global Alliance, set up with the support of 70 industry members. A code of conduct, behavioural standards, is part of this work.

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