

Devin Buonanno (left)  
and Steve Perillo

# Family Business

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## Around the World in 80 Years

Tradition-based, tech-forward  
travel at Perillo Tours

INSIDE PORT  
BLAKELY'S CEO  
SUCCESSION

STEWARDSHIP  
STARTS AT THE  
DINNER TABLE

CARO ROCK: TWO  
DECades OF VISION,  
HEART & IMPACT

HOW TO KEEP  
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# Where to next?

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Joseph Perillo outside his office in the Bronx.

Who hasn't reached back into their memory to commune with one's forebears — a beloved parent, an inspirational grandparent — maybe digging deeper to consult the words and philosophy of a long-gone foundational ancestor? In family business, preserving and honoring your roots is fuel for the future.

Steve Perillo, third-generation CEO of Perillo Tours, founded by his grandfather Joseph in 1945, started thinking in 2024 about how to celebrate the firm's 80th anniversary. His dad, the charismatic Mario Perillo, had become a bit of a television star in the 1980s and '90s, and exuberant spots extolling his signature all-inclusive tours to Italy were known to millions. Mario died in 2003, but Steve wanted to give his father one more turn in the spotlight.

Enter artificial intelligence, coupled with a fearless approach to bending technology to the Perillo message machine. Working with a partner creative agency and a production company to process archival video, and using state-of-the-art deep learning models to authentically reproduce Mario's likeness and image, the end result, viewable on YouTube, speaks for itself.

Mario, in his signature white suit and a big smile, framed by an Italianesque marble stairway, praises his son: "Mario Perillo here, and I've been keeping an eye on you, Steve. I love your new tours to Greece, Spain and Hawaii." Steve replies, "Dad, I knew your spirit was alive and well," before segueing into an invitation to potential customers to "help us celebrate 80 amazing years by joining us on the vacation of a lifetime."

It was a fitting gesture for a company that has thrived by balancing reverence for family with a willingness to experiment — from steamship tickets to social media, from radio jingles to AI-enabled nostalgia.

## FROM TAX RETURNS TO TRIPS ABROAD

Joseph Perillo, fresh out of the University of Naples' law school, arrived in America in 1924, where his legal education got him a job on the foreign desk at Bank of New York. Little more than a decade later, with a \$300 loan and a used Remington typewriter, Joseph saw a lucrative niche catering to established and newly arrived Italian families in and around New York City's Little Italy. Early services included help with immigration issues, translations and currency exchange, as well as arranging food parcels to be sent back to the homeland and brokering airline and steamship tickets. Before long, travel became the Perillo family's big thing.

A turning point came in April 1950, when Mario, an Air Force veteran and practicing attorney, helped organize a visit to Italy with about 200 parishioners from the Bronx's Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church to celebrate the Catholic Holy Year proclaimed by Pope Pius XII. By 1965, Joseph and Mario had built a nationwide presence as the largest Italy-focused tour operator in the country. Catchy radio spots embedded the Perillo Tours name in the minds of millions of prospective travelers across the country at a time when very few agencies went beyond local outreach to seek customers.

Mario was never reluctant to put his big personality on display via television spots, full-page newspaper ads and glossy pamphlets, becoming in many ways a celebrity brand unto himself as "Mr. Italy." And he wasn't shy about bringing son Steve along for the ride as "Mr. Italy, Jr."

Steve remembers, "We were filing tax returns for local Bronx families as late as 1970, along with selling steamship tickets and arranging trips for groups to Italy. With the advent of affordable jet service to Europe, the other services fell away in favor of travel arrangements only. And only to Italy."





## TRADITION-BASED, TECH-FORWARD TRAVEL

When Steve took over, he inherited not just a thriving company, but a legend. The challenge was keeping the magic alive while modernizing the business for a new century. When it comes to family businesses, Steve asserts, one big issue always looms. How far afield should a company go beyond its core competency that made them successful? For Perillo — and for decades — that competency was extreme expertise in one country.

“We’ll never step away from our Italian roots, as Italy will always be at the heart of who we are and a key part of our success,” Steve says. “At the same time, we’re proud of how we’ve grown, using our strengths and networks to create unforgettable journeys to new destinations, always with the same promise of exceptional travel experiences and great value. This is as much a part of Perillo’s story as our heritage in Italy.”

Times change, and successful companies change with them, Steve notes. “The greatest companies change by anticipating new technological and popular trends. But your average, mortal, run-of-the-mill family businesses resist change and only do so when the market demands it.

“So, like most successful travel companies, we have changed in reaction to technological advancements. We spent 20 years selling transatlantic steamship tickets until jet planes came in. So far, the internet revolution has not changed the actual customer touring experience. But AI booking systems and self-driving vehicles could be as disruptive as the rise of air travel over the next decade or two.”

It’s an exciting and challenging vision of a possible future, and that’s where the fourth generation — Steve’s nephew Devin Buonanno — comes in. Devin is the director of product and air operations, a title that takes the company from television and newspaper ads to TikTok and beyond. He specializes in social media marketing, using platforms like Facebook and Instagram to reach customers as well as communicate with travel agents and advisors.

“Perillo Tours’ Facebook presence started prior to my tenure,” Devin notes, crediting company Vice President Diana Ferro with getting the social media ball rolling. As of December 2025, the group has grown to 25,000-plus members, and it’s active every single day.



“It’s one of the most unique things I’ve ever seen: travelers past, present and future, plus many of our own team members, sharing everything from travel banter to helpful tips about Italy, Hawaii, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Ireland and more. It has become a trusted community where questions get answered almost instantly and where the Perillo family feeling truly comes to life,” Devin says.

Meanwhile, Devin continues, “Our presence on TikTok and Instagram is a major part of how we reach a younger and more digitally engaged audience, while also connecting with travelers in the older category. It’s a wider and more dynamic demographic than our traditional base that followed Perillo Tours through TV or print, and it’s allowed us to build strong brand awareness with both first-time travelers and loyal repeat guests.”

The company also has an active presence on YouTube, where it posts longer, more in-depth videos. Across social media platforms, Devin tracks key statistics such as views, engagement rates, follower growth and message volume. “It’s the shares that really get us excited. Those are what

## Steve Perillo’s advice for family business owners

- 1. Use Your Heritage as a Competitive Weapon:** Your family story isn’t nostalgia. It’s branding power. Customers trust businesses with real roots. Use your history deliberately and consistently.
- 2. Honor Your Core Identity, but Keep Evolving:** Stay true to what made you great, but don’t get stuck there. Technology, customer behavior and markets change fast. If you don’t adapt, your competitors will.
- 3. Overlap Generations on Purpose:** Don’t throw the next generation into leadership cold. Bring them into decision-making years before they take over so they absorb the culture and the craft.
- 4. Let the Next Generation Fail — Safely:** Give younger family members room to try ideas, even bad ones. Controlled failures teach faster than lectures. Just protect customers and the core business while they learn.
- 5. Don’t Force Family Into Roles They Haven’t Earned:** Some relatives will shine, others won’t. That’s normal. Let talent rise naturally and don’t keep people in seats just because of their last name.
- 6. Bring in Outside Expertise When Needed:** A strong family business knows when to embrace outside leaders or advisors. Fresh thinking can steady the ship during transitions and open opportunities you can’t see from inside.
- 7. Remember That Culture Starts With You:** Your behavior sets the tone. People watch how you treat customers, staff and partners. If you live the company’s values, others will follow.
- 8. Put the Family Face Forward:** People connect with people, not logos. When appropriate, be visible. Your authenticity and story can attract customers in ways corporate branding never will.
- 9. Let Digital-Native Voices Lead the Digital Strategy:** Younger team members who grew up online understand the platforms instinctively. Give them real responsibility to build your digital reach.
- 10. Protect Ownership Structures That Keep the Business Stable:** Trusts, long-term plans and clear agreements can shield the company from family conflict or unexpected events. Put structure in place before you need it.
- 11. Set Clear Timelines for Leadership Transitions:** Succession only works when everyone knows the plan. Be explicit. Set dates, developmental milestones and expectations, and communicate them widely.
- 12. Guard the Family’s Pride and Unity:** Your emotional connection to the business is part of its strength. Protect it. Celebrate wins, resolve disputes quickly and keep the long-term family legacy front and center.



help spread the word and get our content seen far beyond our existing audience. Our priority is using the power of each platform and every follower or watcher to amplify our message and grow the Perillo brand organically.

"I work closely with our creative video agency, Midrise Media, with a clear vision in mind — my grandfather Mario was 'Mr. Italy' and revolutionized TV advertising in the '70s, '80s and '90s, creating an impact that we still feel at Perillo every single day. Our goal is to do the same thing now — to bring that same level of innovation, storytelling and brand recognition into the 21st century's version of television advertising. Call it social media with a modern twist."

### MAPPING THE FUTURE

The three generations of the Perillo family working in the business have overlapped each other by two decades, and Devin's time with Steve over the next 10 years will put him in the same category: "It's been a very long, seamless change from leader to leader. Embracing innovative technology is the hallmark of each new generation," Steve says.

Devin, Steve continues, "has truly grown up in the company. He's been around Perillo Tours since he was born and spent his childhood in the office. He became known for bringing in his LeapFrog globe every week and quizzing the staff on world geography and the capitals of all 50 U.S. states.

"Devin draws on experience across nearly every department in the company. His deep roots in the family business, combined with modern strategy, social-media leadership and destination development, are helping to shape the next era of Perillo Tours. He knows the company inside and out, from stamping envelopes to designing our next generation of tours, and he plays a key role in our evolution and long-term vision."

"Honestly, one of the best parts of it all is working for a family company," Devin says. "That's what truly sets us apart from everything and anything else. There's a sense of pride, heart and connection behind what we do that you just can't replicate, and people feel that when they travel with us."

### THE NEXT GENERATION'S ITINERARY

Sometimes a welcome and expected generational handoff isn't precisely aligned, for whatever reason. In those situations, adding non-family professional expertise can be pivotal. A couple of years ago, with heir apparent Devin in his mid-20s, Steve decided to buttress the business with outside executive talent. Meeting up with luxury travel Abercrombie & Kent President Keith Baron at an industry trade show proved propitious.

It was very nearly an on-the-spot, handshake deal: "I was ready for a change, but I wasn't actively looking for it," Keith remembers. "Steve invited me to join Perillo Tours in late 2023 to drive strategy that supports the company's long-term growth and ensures its ongoing legacy. To have chosen a leader from outside the company or the family wasn't an easy decision. Steve anticipated that I would bring in external perspectives and industry best practices, along with innovations to help bolster the company and prepare for the next period of family succession."

Keith regularly works with Devin in a mentoring capacity as the firm moves toward Perillo's fourth generation of leadership. "I do my best to offer candid perspective, guidance and support based on my own external experience that would



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otherwise be challenging for Devin to obtain from within," he notes. "We've built an excellent rapport over the past two years, which is helpful when examining key business considerations, especially those within a family business."

Bringing Keith in has been huge, Steve says. "I have a five-year plan for Devin to take over the company by 2030. My father introduced me to the public, very gradually, over 12 years. I'm doing the same for Devin who will increasingly become the face of the company."

#### GLOBETROTTING BUT GROUNDED

Corporate culture starts at the top, Steve observes. "Large companies have to formalize their values in writing, but smaller organizations, where everyone has easy access to the leadership, can receive the core values through firsthand interactions. At Perillo, we keep the Golden Rule front and center always. Fair dealings can never be dismissed."

Perillo Tours continues to honor and reinforce the values handed down from the very first day Joseph opened his shop, Steve says. "Every employee is essential to the company's operation. In marketing, people trust people more than brands and logos. Consistent public presence of the company leader builds an emotion-

al connection and reinforces our generational story. Seventy-five years before podcasts, my grandfather had his own travel show on Italian radio in New York City. Our leaders have been promoting themselves and the company since the beginning!"

Steve describes the company as small and tightly held, residing in a trust for estate planning and liability protection. He has characterized the trust as a monarchy: Disputes can simmer; bad actors, even family members, can come and go; challenges to leadership can arise, "but the trust is always above it, protecting the business." Right now, there's no need for formalized governance structures and documents, he says, but that day may be coming.

With a long legacy of success, a proven and growing suite of products, thousands of happy new and repeat customers, keen eyes on technology and travel trends, and a natural succession plan buttressed by core family values and institutional expertise, the future looks bright. "I plan to celebrate our 100th anniversary with Devin at the helm and the entire family enjoying the fruits of a century of love and labor." **FB**

*Scott Chase joined Family Business 20 years ago and is a frequent contributor to the magazine.*