



[Rana Florida](#)

CEO, The Creative Class Group

Your Start-Up Life: How a Focus on Quality Took a Company From Bankruptcy to Profit

Posted: 10/03/2012 9:15 am

Your Start-Up Life is a business advice column by [Rana Florida](#), CEO of the [Creative Class Group](#). In addition to answering readers' questions she features [conversations](#) with successful entrepreneurs, creative thinkers and innovative leaders. Send your questions about work, life and play to rana@creativeclass.com

Slightly more than a decade ago, the Italian luxury fashion house [Bottega Veneta](#) fell into bankruptcy and was acquired by PPR, formally the Gucci Group. Tom Ford's first step was to bring in the German designer Tomas Maier as Creative Director. Maier had trained in Paris and made his name at Hermès; his mission was to strip out the tawdry excess that had diluted Bottega Veneta's brand, restoring its focus to craftsmanship and understated elegance. Maier not only brought the company back to solvency; he made it a watchword for contemporary functionality and timeless design.

The 55-year-old Maier, divides his time between Milan, New York and Palm Beach, and still has time to manage his own label along with his long-term partner, Andrew Preston, who serves as the C.O.O. "What I learned at Hermès," he told [Vanity Fair magazine](#), "was passion and patience. But, in a certain way, it's easier to do this in Italy. It is the difference between the Italians and the French: the Italians are up for trying anything, whereas the French always tell you, 'That is not the way it is done.' And they don't move from that position."

Maier's experience at Bottega Veneta exemplifies the importance of quality and shared values in turning around an organization -- a focus that must come from the ground up, infusing it at every level.



Photo courtesy Bottega Veneta

Q. How would you describe your creative process?

A. It's a very deliberate mix of the mental and the physical. I want to design things that combine intellect, emotion, craft, and functionality, and in order to do that, I've had to devise a process for myself that is both disciplined and open-ended. So I start with color -- not general shades but very specific, precise hues -- then I consider materials, which naturally lead to shape and construction. Always, from beginning to end, there's a particular question or idea that animates the process for me. It could be anything, from a wish to explore how different construction techniques affect the feel of a jacket, to an interest in creating the contemporary equivalent of a suit of armor. The idea is the start and the end, but in between I rely very much on my senses.

Q. How do you inculcate a culture of quality in an organization?

A. In my experience, a culture of quality has to be established from the ground up. You can't just sit in your office and tell people to meet certain standards. Instead, you have to insure that the people who are doing the actual producing share your values and standards. One reason I love to work with artisans is that men and women who have worked for years to master their craft are naturally committed to producing the highest possible quality.

Q. How do you keep reinventing when it seems as if everything has been done before?

A. I never feel that it's all been done before. Maybe that's because I'm generally more interested in evolution than revolution. I love the challenge of finding new approaches to objects and issues that have been around for a long time. Creatively, I think much of innovation lies in the details. You need to get into the particulars and start experimenting to see what changes are worthwhile.

Q. How do you like to work? Describe a normal day.

A. My day depends on where I am. If I'm in Milan, my day is spent meeting with different members of my team to discuss the different collections we produce, and preparing for whatever show we're presenting. In New York I do a lot of my design work, and also work on the advertising campaigns. In Florida, I split my time between Bottega Veneta and the Tomas Maier label. We have stores nearby, and I like to spend time there too.

Q. Where do you get your inspiration?

A. I get inspiration from all over. I spend a lot of time looking at art and architecture -- visiting galleries, museums, and interesting buildings -- and I am always inspired by what I see. Nature has a big impact on my work, especially where color is concerned. But I also find inspiration in more everyday scenes, like watching women on their way to work in the city. It's important to me to understand the real-life needs of the men and women I design for, so I'm always observing how people navigate the everyday situations of their lives.

Q. What traits do you look for in collaborators?

A. Integrity, expertise, an appreciation for tradition, and a genuine interest in working with other people. I also look for a strong aesthetic point of view, because I enjoy working with people who bring a compelling perspective to the table.

Q. When do you know something isn't working and how do you change gears?

A. Learning to walk away from something that isn't working is one of the hardest things to do. I'm a perfectionist and I will shut down a project when I realize the result won't meet my standards. I can't tell you when I know this, though -- of course, it always feels like it's too late. At that point, I just move on. Maybe I'll come to the idea another time, maybe not. But I don't dwell on it.

Q. What advice do you give to couples working together?

A. In my experience, it's important to define clear roles for each person. Once you've decided who is doing what, you need to support each others' decisions. Of course, that's easier said than done. But if you're going to build a business, you need to find a way to split the work and share the responsibility.

Q. How do you balance form vs. function?

A. There's no formula. For me, that balance is one of the great challenges of designing.

Q. What's the best business advice you ever received or given?

A. Put your product first. If you produce a quality product, and never shift your focus from that, you will create the foundation of a strong business.

Follow Rana Florida on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ranaflorida