



Laila Al-Yousuf



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Ed Bakos



Christopher Sharp

# BETTER TOGETHER

## ARE BRANDED DESIGNER PRODUCTS GOOD FOR THE INDUSTRY?

**T**he past decade or so has experienced burgeoning designer branding, specifically within the interior design industry. Many well-known designers have forged alliances with manufacturers to produce a branded product representative of their name or company, from ceramic tile lines to furniture and rug collections.

*Commercial Interior Design* asked industry stakeholders whether branded interior designer lines with manufacturers dilute the interior design profession to that of a sales scheme, or strengthen it by celebrating and promoting design success?

Interior designer Laila Al-Yousuf of Pringle Brandon Perkins+Will, commented: “The key is to differentiate between a designer who is capable of leading new movements in our industry — influencing other industries and leaving a legacy behind where their products are still widely used — and a designer whose purpose is the commercialisation of their name.

“The former has researched, explored and made it their mission to create a solution for a particular design challenge. This is what in turn inspires other designers, thereby changing our industry for the better. Meanwhile, the latter turns the ideas of design into a money making mockery of what our industry should be about.”

Perhaps the real challenge lies in the ability to differentiate between the two. One distinction, as Al-Yousuf suggested, hinges

on whether something different was created or new design territory was traversed, versus a mainstream product created and a label attached.

Christopher Sharp, CEO and co-founder of The Rug Company, which carries a number of branded designer collections, added: “We encourage the designers to suggest new ideas that challenge us and push our manufacturing techniques. We always say to the designers: ‘suggest anything and we’ll do our best to find a way to realise your ideas’. We are not afraid of failure; not innovating is more disappointing.”

Hospitality design firm Champalimaud Design found inspiration to create a branded fabric line with clothier Holland & Sherry because they encountered a void in the marketplace and were unable to source an existing product to meet their client’s needs.

Managing director Ed Bakos said: “When we were redesigning the Hotel Bel-Air we found it challenging to find a transitional fabric that was both luxurious and practical, something that had sophistication and style. So our indoor/outdoor fabric was born.” Bakos added that Champalimaud crafts bespoke products for clients every day, so it was natural to move into product development.

Likewise, ceramic bathroom furniture giant Duravit collaborated with a designer whose design presented an insurmountable production challenge. Toni Elkadi, Duravit’s area manager for the UAE, Qatar and Oman indicated

that by finding a solution together, it represented growth for both the designer and manufacturer.

Quality represents a second distinction. Sharp recalled that it was the meticulous craft of their hand-made rugs that attracted fashion designer Alexander McQueen to collaborate with The Rug Company for his collection.

Not only is quality of the product important, but equally so of the designer and its vision. Sharp shared that his company didn't originally plan to manufacture designer-branded products. Its first collaboration materialised when he met fashion designer Paul Smith in his shop. A casual chat evolved into The Rug Company's first collaboration. After a few designer collections were made, more designers approached the firm to initiate branded collaborations.

Sharp revealed that the company's limited capacity forced it to be very selective in adding additional designer lines. He added: "We're not looking to collect designer names, but collect quality design. Every new designer needs to write the next part of our design story and not cover areas already explored."

So, who benefits from branding? Champalimaud Design believes everyone does. Bakos explained his company's branded products make it possible for consumers to acquire Alexandra Champalimaud's vision at a lower price point. Through its product, Champalimaud Design also hopes to attract future interior design clients.

Bakos continued: "We benefit from increased brand recognition, especially in international locations where we have not done a lot of work. Through these collaborations, we are able to leverage our partner's expansive customer base and new international networks."

Al-Yousuf offered a similar but alternate view: "It makes the

process of selection that much easier for a client who possibly already has a favourite designer. Moreover, the designer is defining a brand which, as a marketing strategy, establishes a certain sense of appeal and works off an individual's desire to own something for the sake of who it is by, either for a perceived level of quality or just for the name. This can be advantageous to us because the products quite often sell themselves."

However, she also voiced concern that there is a disadvantage in that branded products can partially remove the designer's own creativity from their designs and can lead to an element of laziness where they are not exploring fresh alternatives.

Although the incidence of branded products have increased in interior design houses in the past few years, designer-manufacturer collaborations are not a new phenomenon.

For example, Cassina has worked closely with important architects and designers, such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, since its early days. Textile company Maharam cites its longstanding interdisciplinary collaboration with a multitude of designers, including Gio Ponti and Josef Hoffmann. These aren't thought of as sales schemes, but rather tried and true product standards.

"Who better to make products than the interior designers themselves? They know what the market needs, what works and what doesn't. The industry benefits when designers bring innovation and style to basic products," said Bakos.

Likewise, Al-Yousuf commented: "As a designer, it feels like a natural transition...Designers have innate problem-solving skills, as this is the core of our jobs. We like to invent and we often like to re-invent." 

