

The Secrets of Paul Smith's Success

This year British designer, Sir Paul Smith, celebrates the 40th anniversary of his iconic fashion brand. Since the opening of his first store dedicated to men's fashion in his home city of Nottingham in the UK in 1970, his empire has grown to stores around the world, stocking pieces from each of the 26 collections that he produces annually, which includes accessories, china tableware, furnishing fabrics, menswear, womenswear and a forthcoming childrenswear debut.

At this year's Stockholm Furniture Fair the designer spoke to the audience about the need for individuality and creativity in such a competitive market. Here are some of Sir Paul Smith's tips for success:

Starting your own business

"At the beginning of my career I only opened my shop on Fridays and Saturdays. So if you're a young designer and you want to stick with the purity of your style and vision, in the early days don't try and rely on that as your main income. Try and subsidize it in some way. From Monday to Thursday I did anything that came along to earn a living, including driving a van across the UK selling men's suits. It was quite demoralising, but eventually I became a freelance stylist, designer, colourist and I designed fabrics. By doing all that I was able to make enough money to keep my little shop open 2 days a week."

Pioneering spirit

"Right at the beginning of my career when I had just my small shop, I wanted to sell other things rather than just clothes. Without realising, I was very pioneering, Both the owners of Colette in Paris and 10 Corso Como in Milan told me that my shop in Covent Garden gave them the inspiration to sell more than just clothes."

You can't do it without doing it

"By working in a warehouse, driving a van and packing boxes, I realised that VAT didn't mean vodka and tonic, but value added tax. By doing this and gaining these experiences I did better than a lot of my friends who were better designers."

Be yourself

"Individualism is vital. There are so many designers out there and so much of everything. You need to show your character and personality. When I first went to Japan in 1982 it was just me and a Japanese man who spoke schoolboy English, so my personality really helped me. When I was bored in a meeting I would bring out a rubber chicken or take out a train set from inside my briefcase and said "I need to play with my train now, I'm bored". They never forgot me! (I've now got 200 shops and quite a substantial business in Japan)."

Never take the easy option

“Do things which are right, not which are easy. Of course, it’s easy for me to say now that I am established, and it is much harder for someone who’s just starting out when you need to make cash, but once you establish yourself, try to do things that are right, things that are better for your long term future.

Assume nothing

My company motto is ‘never assume’, which has been brilliant. Double and triple check things. Don’t just send your designs off to a factory and wait for them to magically turn out beautifully, get yourself down to the factory and check the quality and if it’s done properly.

“Make room to break rules: Don’t get locked into formulas of how things should be. Ask ‘What if? Why can’t we do it this way?’”

Stop making sense

“Logic is predictable, think differently. Don’t take the obvious route and look at what others are doing with a view to imitating, look so that you know what not to do.”

Be aware

“Notice what is going on in the world. My motto is ‘Think global, act local.’ We’ve seen the demise of companies that think that they can just role out the same model all around the world. Always try to have a more local point of view and really check it out well, rather than taking the arrogant point of view of thinking that just because you do well in one country that you’ll be successful in another.

www.paulsmith.co.uk