

Creating Fashion

An Interview with Diane von Furstenberg, DVF Studio

EDITORS' NOTE Diane von Furstenberg first arrived in the fashion world in 1972, and by 1976, had sold millions of her iconic wrap dress. Following a hiatus, she reemerged in 1997 on the New York fashion scene with the relaunch of the dress that started it all. In 2005, von Furstenberg was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and, one year later, was elected the CFDA's new President. She sits on the board of Vital Voices and is also a board member of the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA).

COMPANY BRIEF Headquartered in New York City, Diane von Furstenberg (www.dvf.com) was founded in 1972 by the designer and is renowned for its iconic wrap dress and signature prints. A global luxury lifestyle brand, it has expanded to include ready-to-wear, swimwear, handbags, footwear, eyewear, luggage, accessories, DVF by H. Stern fine jewelry watches, fragrance, and rugs. Its collections are sold in over 71 countries and in 33 namesake retail boutiques worldwide.

What was your vision for the company in the early days and did you ever imagine that it would become the global leader it is today?

I had no idea it would become such a phenomenon. I was young and working in a factory in Italy learning about prints and colors. Before I knew it, I was pregnant and getting married and moving to America. I thought it was all very exciting, but also I knew that I had to have a career of my own. So I convinced the factory owner to let me make a few little dresses and take them with me to sell in America. I was a European princess, so people were quite nice, and I was able to get a meeting with Diana Vreeland, the editor of *Vogue*. She loved the dresses and she helped me. Two years later, I invented the wrap dress, which turned out to be exactly what women wanted at the time, and they put me on the cover of *Newsweek*. It was an exciting time; I guess you could say I was living the American dream. In the '80s, I took a break from fashion and moved to Paris, so the second time around, I was more of a Comeback Kid. But all of the young models were buying my dresses in the vintage shops and I thought, why not? So I relaunched and from there it became a global brand.

What makes the brand so special and what have been the key drivers behind your success?

Women inspire me and I have always designed to inspire them. I have always tried to listen to what women want and then to give them that; it has been a dialogue and I think that is what has made the brand successful. It is not as much about the dress as it is about the woman – it is always about the woman.

You have broadened your product offerings over the years. Would you highlight some of these areas and your plans for additional brand extensions?

I have decorated some suites in my favorite hotel, Claridge's in London, and I have designed some home products. I have also designed some beautiful fine jewelry for H. Stern, as well as eyewear, and I have collaborated with Gap to create a line for kids. But my newest endeavor has been designing accessories, like small leather goods that are elegant and practical, as well as handbags that let you carry your iPad and use it with just the pull of a zipper.

Would you highlight the global footprint for the business and which international markets offer the greatest opportunities for growth?

We are in over 70 countries now and that has been very exciting. We have really grown in China over the past few years and I have spent a lot of time there, learning about their culture and introducing myself and my brand, as it's an important market for us. We have also grown our presence in South America and I look forward to focusing there as well.

How much has technology impacted your business and is the Internet driving sales or is it primarily informational?

DVF.com is an important part of our business that we continue to grow. It is definitely driving sales and we are constantly working to make it a home base for the brand and also a fantastic place to shop.

You have been a leader in philanthropy throughout your career. Which key charitable areas are you most focused on?

It is my mission in life to empower women. I do this through fashion, mentoring, and philanthropy. I am on the board of Vital Voices, an amazing NGO that is working to empower women all over the world and give them a voice.



Diane von Furstenberg

In 2010, I created The DVF Awards, which supports and honors extraordinary women who are working to make a difference in their communities and beyond. I have learned that generosity is the best investment. I have met so many remarkable people and I have never met a woman who is not strong.

What advice do you give to young people today that hope to build a design career?

I always tell young designers to be true to themselves as well as to apply for design awards, because the application process is designed for you to articulate who you are, to get your vision down on paper – and it is always easier to execute against something when it is down on paper. So figure out who you are and what your work is about and go for it.

You have achieved so much success in your business. Do you take time to reflect and celebrate what you have accomplished or are you always looking to the future?

There is always more to do, but I also take time to reflect and to find clarity because that is important. I am very lucky to have a wonderful family and a wonderful career. I am the woman I wanted to be. So I try to take time to enjoy it and to love it – love is life.

What are the key priorities for Diane von Furstenberg to continue growing the brand and to remain an industry leader?

I just want to keep doing what I am doing, to continue being true to myself, and to keep creating fashion that will become a woman's best friend. ●