



Michele Caniato

EDITORS' NOTE In addition to his role at Culture + Commerce, Michele Caniato became President of Material ConneXion in 2008, having worked at the company since its inception almost 20 years ago. Caniato speaks regularly on the business of design and has written for *Ottogono*, and *The New York Times*, among others, on design-related topics. He has a B.A. in architecture and industrial design from the Polytechnic University in Milan.

COMPANY BRIEF Culture + Commerce (culture.commerce.com) is the country's leading design management agency and strategic design consultancy, co-founded by Michele Caniato in 2001. Both Culture + Commerce and its sister company Material ConneXion (materialconnexion.com), a consultancy that helps companies innovate and create the products and services of tomorrow through smart materials and design thinking, were acquired by SANDOW® in 2011. Material ConneXion has a global presence in New York, Bangkok, Bilbao, Daegu, Milan, Skövde, and Tokyo, as well as satellite libraries in Chiang Mai, Copenhagen, Grand Rapids, Hong Kong, Mexico City, and Salt Lake City.

How do you describe Culture + Commerce and Material ConneXion, and are they interconnected or separate?

They're very connected and focus on two very important subjects. Culture + Commerce focuses on using design in the world as a business tool. Material ConneXion is essentially the largest material library and consultancy practice in the world of materials innovation.

I started the company 20 years ago with George M. Beylerian. It was acquired four years ago by Adam Sandow and we're very proud to be a part of SANDOW. Our mission in the beginning was to create a destination for creative people in different industries to look for materials to be used for various things, like the packaging for a pair of PUMA shoes or a line of luggage.

We now have a company with close to 150 employees around the world and 13 locations, and the majority of Fortune 500 companies are clients of Material ConneXion.

Materials Innovation

An Interview with Michele Caniato, President, Culture + Commerce, and President, Material ConneXion

We're not here to look for the best materials; we are looking for the newest and most innovative materials in general. Also, we never look at materials, technology, and processes applied to a specific industry; we look at how a material can make a difference in a variety of industries.

One of our members, Nike, found material here for their Jordan line of shoes that had been developed for the construction industry. As a result, this shoe sold out and was recognized for that material. The success of Material ConneXion is to look at materials from a technical point of view and work with our clients to use those materials to create something new and different.

Material ConneXion has an incredible library with close to 8,000 materials and every month, between 40 and 50 new materials are entered into the library.

We are completely commercially independent from any of the companies that we have in our library. The specifier, the interior designer, or the developer comes to us for innovation, and they know that we provide the information not because we are paid by the manufacturer, which makes us very trustworthy.

We have had a relationship for over 10 years with Thailand. They wanted to have a Material ConneXion inside of their design center in Bangkok to also utilize as a global platform to export and showcase materials that are made in Thailand.

Innovation doesn't always come from technology; it can come from raw materials from the natural world, so there are banana leaves, for instance, that can be engineered to perform a different task. Material ConneXion has worked with the government of Thailand and also that of the Philippines to match their natural resources with companies who want to turn them into finished products and create business.

Does your clientele need to hold a membership?

Material ConneXion requires a fee that will allow a company to use our facilities around the world and enter the library, offering unlimited time to do general materials research, or to work on a specific project or product. We can also perform as consultants for a company's team to determine the best materials for a project.

Is it difficult to come up with new materials to add to the library every month?

I have an incredible team in New York whose job is to seek out these new materials. Companies also send us materials they consider innovative, so we sit down with around 10 different category

experts and we vote on whether these materials are innovative enough to be part of our library.

Is there a certain mentality required for this type of job?

Under SANDOW's culture, team members feel like they are working for themselves. The company philosophy is always to bring to the forefront one's own entrepreneurial spirit.

Being in the service business is risky because it's about the experience, so we're focused on training and the quality of our team.

At the end of each day, we are the face of our clients, and we have a strong internal training program to keep our team members engaged.

Would you touch on the business for Culture + Commerce more specifically?

The culture of design was once all about luxury but the world has since changed. With Culture + Commerce, we have educated Fortune 500 companies to use design as a business tool and shown them how they can create a better product that is not just pleasing to the eye but also successful in terms of functionality and generating revenue.

Culture + Commerce is focused on working with different industries and with Material ConneXion, helping with the selection of materials and discussing the importance of design thinking with our clients.

We are not designers as an agency but we represent close to 20 different talents. We've become the vehicle for designers to connect with Fortune 500 companies and to allow them to use the creativity, which we uniquely tapped into, to create better products.

Companies typically share with us their road map of design and we can create a road map for them for how to use design as a business tool. These two concepts go hand in hand.

Does the growth and awareness for the brand at this stage come mostly from word-of-mouth? How do you build the brand?

We are growing. We have become an authority at least in the world of industrial design and as a point of reference in the materials arena.

My goal is for every country to have a Material ConneXion because innovation doesn't just come with nanotechnology or with things that are in that space. Every country has regional technology or material.

Culture + Commerce is more of a boutique agency right now and we are known more via word-of-mouth. We are well-known in the world of interior and industrial design and there is a great opportunity for us to grow and become the place to go for design needs for many companies. ●