

DESIGN

Infusion of style for retailers

For that competitive edge, retailers link up with décor designers to feature specialty products.

DAVID A. KEEPS

As one of the many vendors who sells designs to CB2, the affordable modern offshoot of Crate & Barrel, Bernard Brucha was used to working anonymously. Last year, one phone call changed all that.

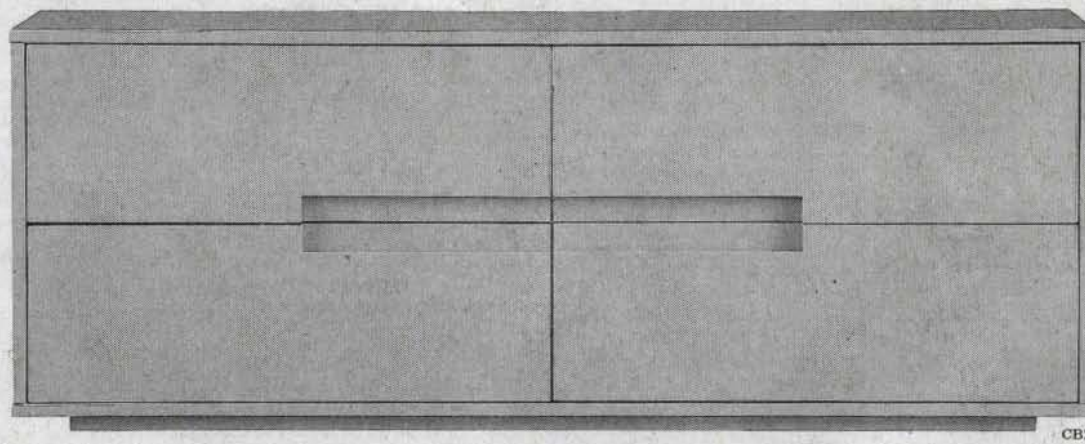
"They asked if they could use my name and likeness on the website," said Brucha, founder of the Venice, Calif., furniture firm Mash Studios, who now appears in a designer profile on the CB2 blog.

Brucha is not the first American designer to be promoted as a rising star by a retailer. Nor will he likely be the last. A quick flip through catalogs and visits to stores over the last few months has revealed a growing trend: In a recession-rocked economy, home décor manufacturers are using established brands and building home-grown designer-name franchises to entice increasingly savvy customers and hoist up the bottom line.

"As manufacturers swallow each other up, design becomes the differentiator," said Grant Kirkpatrick of KAA Design, an architecture interior and landscape design firm that recently launched the Rusa outdoor furniture collection for Design Within Reach.

"Corporate America used to think beauty was frivolous," he added, "but the great revolution has been that design sells because people want beauty in their lives."

And home décor manufacturers, which, contrary to popular belief, are staffed by product developers and buyers but rarely maintain in-house design departments, are happy to oblige. In addition to Brucha's Mash Studios, CB2 offers goods by some two dozen young designers and artists. Williams-Sonoma's West Elm hypes its ongoing collaboration with event designer David Stark and 24 others in the "We Love" page on its website. On a more upscale note, Garnet Hill has exclusive bed and bath linens by fashion designer Eileen Fisher. And Ballard Designs recently



CB2

paired with Atlanta interior decorator Suzanne Kasler, a designer for Hickory Chair furniture and Savavieh rugs.

"Working with Ballard Designs has been a way for me to share my design aesthetic and bring some of my ideas to products that are affordable," said Kasler, who is known for high-end interiors.

"Connecting with a designer is a great way to inject a fresh perspective to your assortment in an increasingly noisy and crowded marketplace," said Ryan McKelvey, president of Ballard, which launched more than 100 Suzanne Kasler items in August. It was the first such collaboration in the company's 27-year history and is showcased in 37 million catalogs mailed out each year.

This marketing approach is certainly not without precedent. IKEA and Design Within Reach have built reputations by cashing in on designer currency, often providing headshots and biographies of creators in catalogs store displays and on websites.

In the 1990s, Target pioneered the idea of designer exclusives, teaming with architect Michael Graves to produce modernist housewares, and the chain continues to partner with of-the-moment international designers such as Philippe Starck, Tord Boontje and Marcel Wanders for limited-run collections. The retailer also has an ongoing line of home accessories created by interior decorator Victoria Hagan.

Crate & Barrel has a 4-decade-old relationship with the Finnish textiles and table wares company Marimekko, which has produced

DESIGNER: Bernard Brucha of Mash Studios designed a dresser for CB2 and is featured on its blog.



JUST RIES

exclusive designs that account for 5% of the store's merchandise and in mid-May will open the first of a string of Marimekko store-within-a-store boutiques at its store at the Grove in Los Angeles.

"Marimekko had to come to us and say you need to use the name more," said Raymond Arenson, executive vice president of merchandising and design at Crate & Barrel. "We do tend to be shy of using the name. We've always thought to shout another brand within our brand seemed odd. Once you become a vehicle for brands, you are a department store and not a brand yourself."

If the business model of the 2000s was brand building, it might be said that, for many home décor companies, the '20-tween years will be about strategic alliances — using other brands to survive and evolve.

"In today's flattened market, the ability to have product that is

not available anywhere else is a significant competitive advantage," said Russ Gatskill, chief executive of Garnet Hill. Not every venture has been a hit, he said. The catalog company tried to sell the trendy Indian block print bedding of John Robshaw, but, Gatskill said, "it did not resonate with our customer."

Many in the home décor industry find less risk in heritage brands: In addition to Marimekko, Crate & Barrel reissued Classic Century, a 1952 collection by modern dishware designer Eva Zeisel. The Sundance catalog carries reissued pottery from Los Angeles-based Bauer; Garnet Hill carries Pendleton blankets and Frette sheets.

Such licensing arrangements, Gatskill said, "allow us to expand into new product categories where we may not have perceived expertise."

Other retailers, particularly young modernist-oriented CB2 and West Elm, which don't have designers on staff, forge relationships with lesser-known names.

"We're building our brand on the shoulders of all the new fresh designers," said CB2 director Marta Calle. "We don't know how many people actually know who they are, but we think people deserve to know."

Working directly with a designer instead of buying already manufactured goods from a factory is a more arduous process. It requires finding resources and materials, creating prototypes and getting designer approvals before products can reach the shelves. According to Calle, it is well worth the effort.

"Having merchandise that

doesn't look like cookie-cutter products churned out by a computer brings credibility to a brand," she added. "And there is no greater joy than seeing a young designer who thinks there is no way in hell he can get his product made and then we do it and get him a royalty check."

Having collaborated with some 25 designers and artists in the last few years in a design scene she compares to indie music and film, West Elm Creative Director Alex Bates calls the trend a celebration of individual talents in a world of mass-produced goods.

"Consumers are romantic. They care about how they spend their money and love the stories behind the things they buy," she said. "I mean, who really needs a vase? But if you buy one that you love and it supports a new artist, it's a win-win."

Ceramist Sarah Cihat, who became a darling of the DIY décor set with her Rehabilitated Dishware, agreed.

"Design has become more accessible, and people actually seem to care about it," said Cihat, who worked with West Elm on a June collection based on her over-glazed vintage plates. "They are interested in the person behind the piece that they put into their homes and ultimately their lives."

For everyone involved, this wave of designer décor is a tide that lifts all boats.

"Companies are getting a product specifically for them and are able to charge a little bit more if it has an association with a designer," said Mash Studio's Brucha, who created one of CB2's hottest sellers, the lobster-red Shop chest.

Designers who license their creations get to see their visions realized by companies with the resources to manufacture and sell products.

And for the consumer, Brucha added, the product has cachet, because it's not something that the company just bought off the floor at a trade show in Shanghai.

Said Brucha: "People who buy my furniture at CB2 think, 'Oh, he's an L.A. designer who lived in Brooklyn. He's one of us.'"

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