HOW TO INNOVATE WITHIN A LEGACY BRAND

ERIC VILENCY, WHO INHERITED HIS GRANDFATHER’S 83-YEAR-OLD FURNITURE COMPANY AND TRANSFORMED IT INTO A FULL-SERVICE DESIGN FIRM, EXPLAINS.

BY SARAH LAWSON

Thirteen years ago, at just 26 years old, Eric Villency became the CEO of his grandfather’s eponymous furniture company, Maurice Villency.

Since then, he’s grown the outfit into a full-service design firm—Villency Design Group—creating, manufacturing, and delivering industrial and product design projects like SoulCycle bikes and dorm-room laptop safes, as well as indoor-outdoor furniture.
spaces for the Ritz-Carlton Palm.

Here's how he evolved an 83-year-old company into a modern creative force—and keeps iterating every day:

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE CHANGE**

In 2007, five years into his role at the helm of the company, Villency the younger made the decision to close all of the company's retail stores and make the firm purely B2B, focusing on growing the company's already established network of contract work.

"It was a pivotal decision, but it was the best decision we ever made because it really enabled us to focus on our company and executing for our clients. Once we made that decision, the consumer product part of our company really exploded," Villency tells *Fast Company*.

Villency's business now includes everything from cases for Rihanna's fragrance to Peloton fitness bikes to interiors and branding.

**FIRE ON ALL CYLINDERS**

To deliver on his ever-expanding suite of services and products, Villency has to have a team of people with varied talents.

One of Villency's first charges as CEO was to decide what he had to work with and how to use it. What turned out to be the most valuable legacy his grandfather left him was a thriving framework of manufacturing logistics and technicians.
“There’s a million great design firms out there. But what’s unusual about what we do is we also manufacture and create the products. It’s a total turn-key process, and that’s hard to find,” Villency says.

From the outset of a project, Villency is able to consult not only with his design team, but also with the in-house service technicians who will actually be fixing and installing the work. Of his 300 employees, only about 15 are focused on design full time.

“Theyir opinions are very important in the design process. They can say, ‘Hey, don’t use that spring, or don’t use that ball bearing because I’ve had real problems with it.’ It’s an unusual way of approaching design. It’s really about fabrication and production. And that informs everything we do,” Villency says of the nuts-and-bolts-focused members of his team. “Having those capabilities led us to projects that other people were either unable to do or unwilling to do. That’s how we got our niche.”

In Villency’s pivot, he didn’t let any of his grandfather’s legacy (read: employees) fall by the wayside, either. The CFO, head of engineering, and head of logistics have all worked for the company for more than 30 years.

That in-house diversification is also how Villency Design is able to control quality at every point of its business, from concept to manufacturing to installation.

“Good design isn’t just that it looks good. If you’re talking about people’s fitness equipment, if it looks great but falls apart after a week, that’s not good design. If you’re talking about a product design and a client wants to pay $50 and it comes out cheap, that’s not good design.”
costing $500, that’s bad design,” Villency says. “One of the things that you can often find in product development is you can wait six months or a year of development time to get to a design, and now you have to figure out how to value engineer, and how are you going to make it practical, functional, and durable. Those for us are all equal parts of what we do. It’s not just about the design—though that’s very important. It’s the practicality of how we’re going to make it and how we’re going to take care of it.”

**NOT EVERY SONG YOU WRITE WILL BE A HIT**

In addition to his staff, Villency relies on a roster of perma-lancers and freelancers, allowing the design company to expand and contract based on demand. Plus, they’re able to vary what they can offer clients creatively.
“One of the advantages of having so many freelancers and perma-lancers that we trust is that, just like for musicians, not every song they write is a hit song. Sometimes they’re not on,” Villency says. “Sometimes they create something really special and magical, and sometimes it just doesn’t hit. What does the client respond to?”

Understanding how creative people work—Villency’s paternal grandfather was an artist, and so is his mother—allows him to properly nurture and engage the creative personalities at his disposal.

“The nature of a creative person is sometimes, they could just be having an off week. Or they broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend—whatever it is. We really understand the nature of a creative spirit and try to nurture them and let their talents come through and shine,” he says. “As a creative business and being involved in design, you fail every day. And a lot of business don’t have a lot of failure. I might work on something for six months, show it to a client, and they might say, ‘I don’t like it. What else do you have?’ Failure doesn’t always mean failure. It just means an idea didn’t necessarily resonate or connect. You have to keep plugging.”