Meet the Man Behind the Iconic SoulCycle Bike
And the Peloton bike, and the apparel at Equinox, and...

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Alexander Tamargo/Getty
It’s 8 o’clock in the morning and I’m in a spinning class — but it’s not just any spinning class. This is a Peloton class, run on specialized bikes that are engineered to perfectly simulate the act of being on an outdoor bike (something most spin bikes don’t do a great job of). They’re also equipped with monitors that allow you to see how fast you’re cycling, what your energy output is, and how you’re performing relative to everyone else in the class.

There are maybe 30 people in my physical class, but hundreds more participants all across the country, on their own Peloton bikes (which retail for $1,995). They are watching a video feed of our class on their bikes’ built-in monitors and simulating the in-class experience for themselves. I keep thinking the instructor is looking at me, but really, she’s staring at the camera right above me, giving a few words of motivational wisdom to Linda from Seattle, who’s spinning from her garage.

This is the fitness class of the future, and while you may not have heard of the person behind it, you’ve probably heard of some of the other products he’s created: the signature Organic Avenue juice bottle, the apparel at Equinox, the stingray clutch that comes with Rihanna’s perfume, and, oh yeah — the iconic SoulCycle bike.
That person is Eric Villency — the CEO of Villency Design Group, a family business started by Villency’s grandfather in 1932 that began as a furniture company. Villency joined the company in 1998, and became CEO just a few years later, when he was only 27 years old. His degree is in literature, but he was raised by creatives, including his mother and sister, who are both artists.

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The company's focus on furniture lingered until about a decade ago, when it started taking on bigger projects, like the interior design of the new Delta terminal in Miami, as well as certain parts of Citi Field. "Clients that had worked with us previously had seen our team in action and they trusted us," Villency says. "Gradually there was a creep into disciplines on successive collaborations that went further and further away from our traditional areas." The two projects were so large-scale that they required the company to do way more than just build furniture; Villency and his team were designing and building all kinds of products, and on an industrial scale.

Now, Villency's company does not only design, but also product development, manufacturing, and maintenance; they'll conceptualize your product, then they'll figure out how to produce it on a large scale, and service it when something goes wrong — capabilities not a lot of design groups these days have.

I arrive at the company's SoHo headquarters, and Villency offers to take me on a tour to show me a few of the projects he's been working on. He's stylish and well spoken, but shy and reticent to talk in-depth about his many accomplishments — thankfully, his projects speak for themselves.

The first room is almost empty, save for a desk and a pair of virtual reality goggles. He says that he often uses virtual reality to give clients a sense of scale for products (as if this is a normal thing to say to people). I put the goggles on and see a bike that he's developing for an unnamed client. It's apparently even more advanced and perfectly engineered than the ones he made for Peleton and SoulCycle. In the corner I also see a Bluetooth scale for gym lockers that allows users to track their fitness

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levels through every workout. Like the Peloton class, the whole experience feels ultramodern. The scale has a built-in touchscreen, and the bike looks so real on VR that at one point I reach out to touch the handle.

Though wellness only accounts for about 10 to 15 percent of the company’s business, Villency is often written up as a “boutique fitness designer” due to the high levels of attention he’s received for his projects in that space. He doesn’t seem to mind the association, though, as fitness is both a personal passion as well as a uniquely interesting space to design for, he says.

“When we’re dealing with fitness, there are not users, there are fanatics,” he says. “Fitness is such an intimate interaction with design. I could give you the greatest pair of running shoes, but if you get a blister after you wear them for 10 minutes, you’ll never wear them again. It’s an active interaction,” as opposed to, say, furniture, which he says is mostly a passive experience.

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Because of this, “there are demanding standards” in the fitness category, he says.

With the SoulCycle bike, for example, Villency’s biggest challenge was to close the gap between the style and functionality of outdoor bikes versus indoor bikes.

“Some of the most inspiring designs on our mood boards, even for projects that have nothing to do with fitness, are outdoor bikes,” he says. “They have incredible designs, they’re perfectly engineered, lightweight, strong — then you look at indoor bikes, and there was such a disconnect. They were built for pure utility.”

So, he set out to design an indoor bike that would look and feel as sleek as an outdoor bike. “Anytime we work on a bike, we look outdoors,” he says.
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That said, the format of SoulCycle classes also presented its own distinct set of challenges not solvable through outdoor bike designs.

First, there's the perspiration factor that comes with cycling in a hot, humid room: "You're dealing with unbelievable amounts of sweat," Villency says. "You have to sweatproof these [bikes] an insane amount."

And then there's the fact that hundreds of different people are using these bikes each week: "The amount of abuse this equipment takes — that has to inform how it's made as well."

The bike he ended up with was stylish, easy to maintain, and most importantly, gave riders the kind of workout they might get on an outdoor bike. It was an instant hit, helping to catapult SoulCycle to the cult status it maintains today.

Next up in my tour, Villency takes me into the conference room, where he shows me some of his non-wellness projects (there's also a casually 3D-printed prototype of the bike that I saw in my VR goggles. Villency, as you can probably imagine, loves 3D printing).
Villency says he enjoys working with the kinds of products that aren’t typically design-focused — like a safe, which he has sleekly designed to hide under a nightstand and sync up with your phone, and a self-storage center whose central lobby looks more like that of a boutique hotel (because who actually enjoys the cold, dingy waiting areas of most storage centers?).

"We always like to disrupt through design," he says. "We love categories where no one is paying attention to how things look."

So how did a furniture designer end up with such a high-profile lineup of clients and diverse list of products?

Villency says that his company’s strength and appeal to its customers lies in its ability to design across many categories. "We get to work on such different products in different disciplines," he says. "So sometimes, something from one industry will inform a project in another one. That's how we innovate."
Working in-depth along so many different industries, Villency has also become something of a trendspotter within each of them — a skill that regularly pervades his approach to design. With fitness, "it used to be segregated," he says. "Someone might say, 'I'm a runner, I just run' or 'I'm a swimmer, I just swim.' The boutique fitness craze happened, and now one day people will take a boot camp, the next they'll do yoga. You really need versatility in how you are designing your clothing."

He's also seen the rise of the now-ubiquitous athleisure category, saying that the trend is "here to stay," and will soon overtake denim as the prime fashion that synthesizes comfort and style.

An interesting byproduct of Villency and his team's ability to trend forecast is the company's incubation sector, which develops new, non-client-driven products based either on designs that past clients have passed on or gaps that the team identifies while working in a particular industry. He started this section of the company when clients told him that his designs and manufacturing capabilities were competitive in a number of industries. Plus, Villency simply enjoys the challenge of identifying opportunities and creating something completely new. "It's addictive," he says.

The last room we walk into is filled with these incubation projects. His current lineup includes a very sleek (and impossibly soft) set of skiwear, and a line of performance apparel and bags whose proceeds will benefit homeless veterans. Villency had a meeting with the Pentagon earlier that morning to discuss the latter. I feel like the Pentagon probably doesn't take a lot of meetings with designers with cult-like followings among the SoulCycle crowd, but I could be wrong. I later found out that the line, dubbed "Feats of Strength," had been sold to Bloomingdale's. NBD.
Interviewing Villency is like talking to an engineer, architect, contractor, artist, and style editor all at once — and it’s clear that his company is successful because of this ability to simultaneously play so many different roles.
As I'm wrapping up, I ask Villency what he thinks the next big thing will be in the design world. He says, without hesitation, that he wants to go all in on integrating embedded technology into his products, because "that's what the way the world is going."

"We don't do anything that doesn't have an app or Bluetooth connectivity," he says.

I walk out of Villency Design Group's futuristic HQ in a daze, imagining what I might see if I visit again in 10 years. Maybe Villency will have built an army of fitness drones, or an indoor bike that also flies and makes on-demand kale smoothies — all with built-in Bluetooth connectivity, of course.