

Kate Verner Founder, KV+A

With a career that includes working with such designers and companies as David Rockwell, Laura Kirar, Kohler and Arteriors, Kate Verner has blazed trails for designers in licensing and brand extensions since founding her firm, KV+A, in 2003. Her many accomplishments include helping industry legend Murray Moss launch his iconic retail concept and establishing a luxury licensing division for Clodagh, where Verner spearheaded 14 partnerships.

KV+A offers full product design services as well as complete business representation — from profit evaluation to contracts with the right licensing and production partners.

A graduate of Parsons School of Design, Verner is a design advocate and an engaging speaker. She recently spoke to *DESIGN* about her career and how interested interior designers can expand into the licensing arena.

“Licensing is not about instant gratification — it’s about brand building and story telling.”



Kiwari Dining Table by Laura Kirar for McGuire Furniture

Q & A

Q How did you get into the business? What about it appealed to you?

A I went to Parsons School of Design and studied furniture design. One of my first jobs was assisting Murray Moss who was opening a shop in SoHo named Moss. Moss celebrated contemporary product design, the designers themselves and the importance of the role between manufacturers and designers. I found Murray’s vision fascinating. It was there that I first experienced celebrating the story of the designer, the narrative of their design and how it was translated into manufactured product and sales.

Q Is licensing a home line for everybody? For whom is it best suited?

A Licensing is not about instant gratification — it’s about brand building and story telling. For some, it can mean financial growth but not all licensing opportunities are equal in monetary compensation.

Licensing requires a partnership mentality — you are essentially marrying the manufacturer. It takes patience, the ability to compromise and a passion to see the project through.

Licensing is most beneficial when a designer is partnered with a manufacturer that can execute the vision the designer has.

When a designer brings with them a vision that appeals to a new customer or channel of sale other than whom they already sell to, then there is potential for growth and sales.

Lastly, you need to be able to translate your vision to the manufacturer — magazine tear outs are not enough. Designers are being asked to deliver a higher level of deliverables more now than ever before. Dimensioned, scaled drawings (CAD drawings) with material call outs and finishes are a minimum for success in this business.

Q Licensing is definitely a popular area nowadays — how can designers differentiate themselves from the competition? What is essential for success?

A It’s important a designer understands the brand they are approaching for a collection. The designer needs to bring with them a vision different from what the manufacturer already has from their own in-house design team. Ideally the designer turns up to a meeting with a look book that illustrates what they could do for a manufacturer in the event they partnered — a media kit is no longer the standard.

Many manufacturers look at a designer’s social media to see who follows them and if they engage with their followers. Ideally, a designer brings with them a following —

“Licensing is most beneficial when a designer is partnered with a manufacturer that can execute the vision the designer has.”



customers who follow their brand and will have the appetite to buy what the designer creates.

It’s a small industry — good reputations for being talented, diligent about deliverables and easy to work with and adhering to timelines are all very important.

Q How would an interior designer interested in getting into licensing take the first step?

A To start, the designer has to identify where his/her brand has the most exposure — is it to the general consumer or within the design trade. If your brand equity is in the trade, to whom do you specify from the most? Approaching companies you already have a good relationship with can be a great first step.

It’s a good idea to formulate ideas to share in an in-person meeting. Never send original ideas to a manufacturer unless you have a signed NDA (non-disclosure agreement). Never leave a design presentation behind for a manufacturer to review internally.

Many designers make the mistake of hiring an agent too early in the process. Unless you have an established brand an agent will have little work with. Take the first step yourself — manufacturers like to hear from designers themselves.

Q Are there particular product categories that are the best place to start a licensing line? Why? Are there categories that are more challenging?

A Furniture, fabric and lighting are traditionally the most financially rewarding, high-performance categories. Tabletop is extremely competitive and challenging for a number of reasons, particularly distribution. Candles are expensive to make and represent more of a marketing tool than a revenue source.

Q What should a designer look for in a potential manufacturing partner?

A Always start with if you would buy from them. Research the capabilities, assortment and distribution of a manufacturer when trying to size a potential collaboration and how you can contribute.

Reputation and design aesthetic are perhaps the first and natural set of criteria but there should be more to it. Sizeable companies with established and proven guest designer licensing programs could be seen as a better partner, but don’t rule out the smaller companies that might be entering the landscape with exciting ideas and a lower barrier of entry.