

Experience Matters: Burdifilek Cofounders on Need 'to Be Brave'

As e-commerce and social media continue to transform retail, Canadian interior designers Diego Burdi and Paul Filek still see consumers finding more "authentic" brand experiences in brick-and-mortar.

By Constance Droganes on April 25, 2017



Diego Burdi and Paul Filek
Norman Wong

TORONTO — Like the one-of-a-kind retail spaces they design, Diego Burdi and Paul Filek always have a story to tell about a brand's true essence.

That ability to reveal hidden potential through design has earned Burdifilek, the duo's award-winning Toronto firm, commissions from Canada's Holt Renfrew, Neiman Marcus, Atlanta's W Hotel, Dublin's Brown Thomas and other luxury retailers and businesses across North America, Europe and Asia for nearly 25 years.

"We always go on a journey together with clients who partner with us. But it takes an orchestra of people to make ideas real and to build spaces that are filled with possibility and purpose," said Burdi, 52, who met business partner Filek, 50, in the early Nineties while they were both studying architecture at Toronto's Ryerson University.

Their partnership has since resulted in ISO international awards for Burdifilek's cofounders, including January 2017 accolades from the International Interior Design Association for their design of Toronto's first flagship for upscale outerwear brand Mackage. And still today, even as digital's swaggering transformation of the retail industry continues, Burdi and Filek continue to look at retail through the lens of design.

As they discussed with WWD, tomorrow's brick-and-mortar "destinations" can still deliver more authentic brand experiences thanks to smart design.

WWD: You two launched Burdifilek during a recession. What was that "one" project that changed everything for your start-up?

Paul Filek: There certainly wasn't a plethora of work around when we started out. But we were very passionate and headstrong. We knew that our business would eventually succeed. We just needed an opportunity. That came with Club Monaco. Even though that was 1995-96, this was really our first omnichannel experience, minus the Internet or e-commerce. But the head of the company, Joe Mimran, was a visionary and the brand had such a strong narrative. That allowed us to develop Club Monaco's café, as well as its men's, women's and kid's spaces. It was a wonderful opportunity to experience a brand in all its touch points.

Diego Burdi: We also did the offshoot of Caban, which was the first lifestyle store of its kind in North America. So we were playing with omnichannel right from the get-go because of what Club Monaco was as a brand.

WWD: You've said that your job is to tap into the essence of a client's brand. How has that changed in today's omnichannel environment?

P.F.: The omnichannel debate has changed many things. But I think it's putting more of an emphasis on the in-store experience and making it more engaging for consumers. Compared to digital, brick-and-mortar still comes across as feeling much more authentic to people.

WWD: OK. But there is a generation out there that believes retail should only be experienced and executed through digital platforms. What do you say to those who believe that the bricks-and-mortar retail space is a waste of time and valuable company resources?

D.B.: If we had had this conversation five years ago I probably would be agreeing with them on this point. But we've seen a shift in the market where online retailers now understand that they need bricks-and-mortar to be part of their total brand experience. After all, how can you really know what that cashmere sweater feels like or what it's like to sit on an incredible sofa until you experience it first-hand. Remember, people are social creatures. That has to come into play when you design a retail space. Also, retailers are becoming more multi-faceted. They want to show you the way they think. But it all goes back to smart design and creating touch points of memories that consumers can focus on while they are in the store. That's how you really compliment a brand.

P.F.: Yes, brick-and-mortar feels far more authentic compared to shopping from a predictable, one-dimensional digital screen. The perfect analogy would be online dating. You might find a connection with someone online but at some point you need to move beyond that and put some real human emotion into the mix.

WWD: Where are retailers failing most today in terms of how they present their brand to consumers?

P.F.: Brands run into problems when they don't stay on script with their narrative.

D.B.: Brands can also become too complacent. They need to refocus and be more reactionary. As well, sometimes successful retail design is all about evolution and not just revolution. So you have to think about how you can create that uniqueness and sense of discovery in the design that will make consumers want to come back and explore.

WWD: Looking ahead, what do you believe are the most important design factors retailers must consider as the global market evolves?

P.F.: Retailers constantly need to find the new and evolve their brand's narrative in a way that is easily digestible to consumers. That's absolutely critical.

D.B.: They've also got to realize that consumers are far more design aware today. So they must find a "newness" that is appropriate for their brand and that will allow them to engage current customers and aspirational newcomers at the same time. As well, bigger established brands need to get out of their comfort zone. It's hard to do because they have more at stake. But they can't succeed without thinking outside the box.

WWD: How does your design process begin on a new project?

D.B.: It starts with the narrative that comes from the client. You've got to understand who they are and what's really behind their wish list. It's a no-holds-barred discussion, but we just go for it. In fact, it's a little like experiencing an "a-ha!" moment when they begin to see what is possible.

WWD: What inspires your work today?

D.B.: It can be art, travel. The world is our pool for ideas. It all contributes to the way we play. But we always strive to create the unexpected. We like tossing a good curve ball.

WWD: What is the biggest lesson you've learned over the years and how will it influence the next chapter for Burdifilek?

D.B.: We've always tackled things so that there were never any missed opportunities. It's gotten us this far and what will come next will be interesting. But finding that next visionary down the road and seeing how we can collaborate to create something amazing is what it's all about. It takes vision to that — and braveness. You have to be brave.