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MITCHELL GOLD AND BOB WILLIAMS BUILT A COMPANY THAT'S DOMINANT IN THE MARKETPLACE. NOW, THEY SPEAK WITH US ABOUT BRINGING COMFORT TO THE WORLD THROUGH THE WAY THEY RUN THEIR BUSINESS, THEIR FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND, OF COURSE, BY CREATING GREAT DESIGN.

BY RON SHIPMON





ABOVE: Mitchell Gold (right) and Bob Williams.

IN 1989, MITCHELL GOLD AND BOB WILLIAMS started a furniture company in rural Taylorsville, North Carolina with an investment of \$60,000. Today, the company has more than 750 employees and \$100 million in annual sales; it has been credited with pioneering the durable, washable, slipcovered furniture sold at stores such as Crate & Barrel, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware. Williams, a former graphic artist at *Seventeen* magazine, and Gold, who worked for six years as a furniture buyer at Bloomingdale's, started their business with a simple concept in mind: comfort.

More than two decades later, these visionaries of home decorating have penned decorating books (*The Comfortable Home* and *Let's Get Comfortable*); opened five Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams stores offering furniture, lighting, rugs and accessories (in New York, Connecticut and Washington, DC); and have 15 licensed partnership stores. Their sustainable designs are carried in more than 80 stores across the country — including a stylish bedding collection (now in its second season) sold exclusively at Bloomingdale's. Famous followers of their relaxed design philosophy include President Obama and the First Lady, Nicole Kidman, Eric McCormick and Cher.

Becoming purveyors of furniture was not the first business the pair considered, Williams says. "We purchased a 100-acre farm outside of Virginia. We were going to start a winery and grow Christmas trees. The winery was 100 percent Mitchell's idea, which is odd because he doesn't drink wine at all — just Scotch! I think he liked the idea of being a Gentlemen Farmer. You know, the kind that walks around surveying the land, but never gets his hands dirty. The Christmas tree part was my idea, more as a back-up to the winery in case it did not work out."

Plans changed when the company Gold was working for at the time transferred him to Hickory, North Carolina just two weeks after they purchased the farm. "The town of Hickory is about four times the size of the little town where we were going to live. This meant there would be more options for places to eat, which is important to two guys who do not cook," says Williams, smiling.

Soon, Gold says, their business plan went from farming to furnishing. "When we started the furniture company, we sold 5,000 chairs before we even manufactured the first one."

The Gold+Williams aesthetic represents a reimagining of the past: craftsmanship, tradi-

EXPERT ADVICE ON STARTING A BUSINESS, COURTESY OF CEO MITCHELL GOLD

"HAVE ENOUGH MONEY. Too many businesses fail because they are way too undercapitalized. Figure out what is reasonable and realistic. You don't have to be swimming in money, but in addition to what you need to start your business, you need to have enough money to live for nine months to a year with no income. Remember that while you can raise money to start your business, few investors or banks will want to invest for your standard of living... They want to invest in your business idea.

Don't BS yourself. You really need to know what's working and what's not. I've seen people talk about their business not being good because of the economy, but it really was because their product was not outstanding or their service was terrible.

Have reasonable but high expectations. The way to make money is to realize high expectations. Low expectations are usually hard to drive real profits in.

Nurture the people around you. Whether it is your customer or employee or family member, you need everyone to move your success along. Treat everyone with respect all the time and it will reward you.

Outstanding customer service has to be in your DNA. You have to understand what it is to create it.

You have to [start out with] a GREAT idea — one that is DIFFERENT and BETTER than what is out there!"

tion, style, color and artifacts. The result is a style that feels exciting and authentic — at affordable prices.

But the secret to the company's success goes back to Gold's childhood — spent in a house festooned with fussy formal furniture. "Growing up, we had cane-baked dining room chairs that weren't really comfortable," says Gold. "We couldn't have a dog. We weren't even allowed to sit in the living room." This helped him appreciate the pleasures of an over-stuffed sofa.

Williams explains how he continues to de-

INSPIRING DECORATING TIPS FROM PRESIDENT OF DESIGN BOB WILLIAMS

"A COMFORTABLE HOME CAN HELP KEEP

you organized, happy and healthy. Buying great furnishings is part of the equation, but arranging them in the best possible way is so important to making a home as soothing and relaxing as it can be.

Before you start decorating a room, ask yourself how you want to live in it. Make a list of all the activities that will go on there and what furnishings you need to do them. Take the time to get familiar with a room — best features, views, traffic flow. What do you want people to see first when they walk in the door?

Measure thoroughly so you have a full list of dimensions, and always keep it with you in case you spot a piece you love. Knowing what you need and why, plus what will fit, makes decisions easier and helps you get things right the first time.

Color is key. When people tell us they 'want our look,' a big part of what they're feeling is our color sense. To make a room feel calm and warm without being the least bit bland, we use soft, subtle, solid hues and then enliven with accessories in patterns and stronger colors. We also limit the number of colors in a room to no more than four, with two being accents.

Invest in a few good pieces. Some things not only 'say' quality, but help insure quality of life. It might be a beautiful dining table that lets you entertain the way you've always wanted; a rug that sets the color scheme for a room; or, an antique chest you buy for one room, knowing you can repurpose it over the years by using it in others — an environmentally smart way to decorate.

Remember the details. We often see people invest in decorating a room, but then stop short. Adding accessories (pillows, flowers, photos and collectibles) without cluttering things up will give a room that 'finished' look you see in magazines. It also makes rooms easy to update: Replace and rearrange a few items for a fresh look."

rive inspiration from things that they encounter every day: "Movies, television commercials, even magazines. These forms of media can be as brief as a 30-second commercial or a two-hour movie, but what they all have in common is that they all reflect what is taking place in the world now. They're up-to-the-minute and reflect popular culture. We take this all in consideration when visually interpreting the Gold and Williams brand."

Often companies are content to sit on their laurels (as long as they're generating revenue), but the "comfort" philosophy of Gold and Williams doesn't stop at home furnishings. The company also has an on-site gym and a walking track for staff. Employees also enjoy a "Comfort Zone" located between the executive offices and the manufacturing area, where employees can run errands like banking, arrange for car repairs, get prescriptions filled, buy tickets for regional sporting events, or even rent movies. Plus, each March the company teams up with local hospitals for a free health fair including cholesterol tests, eye examinations and mammograms.

Some comforts even serve double duty. For example, the company is equipped with a highly-rated on-site day care center, which also serves as an informal laboratory to test the durability of the company's products.

With an eye to the future, each year the Mitchell Gold and Bob Williams company awards college scholarships to children of their employees.

"When you live in a rural community and no one in your family has ever gone to college, higher education may not be something you've considered. This program puts the idea

in families' minds, makes it viable financially and opens up a whole new future for children," Williams notes.

Both men support a variety of not-for-profit organizations, including those helping people with life-threatening diseases and those working for equal rights. These groups include LGBT Rights, Teen Advocacy and ALFA (AIDS Leadership Foothills-area Alliance, Inc).

Gold, who is particularly passionate about certain political issues, is also the founder of Faith In America, a not-for-profit organization which fights religion-based bigotry. It frustrates him that there are certain politicians who often attack issues like gay marriage on purportedly religious grounds and are never challenged. "People are using these religious beliefs to deny other people full equal rights," Gold states passionately.

Some of Gold's passion to correct this sort of injustice extends from an experience he had as a 10-year-old child, growing up in New Jersey in the 1960s. A childhood friend, with whom he had played on a regular basis, one day attacked him verbally because of a misunderstood religious doctrine. At the time, the experience left Gold confused, yet later in life, it empowered him to become an advocate for others; ultimately his advocacy work garnered an invitation to the White House to speak out against such behavior. He also compiled *CRI-SIS: 40 Stories Revealing The Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay In America*, in which a diverse group of contributors (including singer Ari Gold, actor Richard Chamberlain and former Governor of New Jersey James McGreevy) share similar experiences. ■

