

# Pivot Perfect

*A Thought Leadership Q&A Series by The Brownstone Group*

## **Allison O'Connor: Making a Difference - Building Brands, Creating Product, Developing People**

Allison O'Connor is the CEO of the revered and mission-driven Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams home business. Previously, she has held executive design, merchandising, marketing, and general management roles at global brands including Abercrombie & Fitch, Urban Outfitters, Williams-Sonoma, and Sheridan Australia.

The Brownstone Group's Tim Boerkoel reflected with Allison on her career spanning compelling distribution channels, many industry sectors, and multiple product categories, as well as launching new business concepts. She shared with us insight on her winning approach to growing brands, teams, and individuals.



**Timothy Boerkoel (TB): Allison, you began college as a pre-med student and graduated with a degree in Historic Preservation. What did you initially think your career would entail, and how did you enter the fashion/retail industry?**

**Allison O'Connor (AO):** All through my childhood I wanted to be a pediatrician and take care of families. I had the privilege to attend Scripps College as an undergraduate student, and during my sophomore year in college took a graduate course in American studies. Falling in love with American history and architecture, I decided to pivot my major to American studies/Historic Preservation. I thought I'd go on to be a professor,

interior-designer, or historian... But as graduation approached, a PhD path was becoming seemingly less ideal or possible, so I took a year off from the academic track to explore another path.

It was serendipity that I met Elliot Stone, then Chairman of Jordan Marsh, who asked me, "Why don't you try this?" I'd enjoyed working at Nordstrom as a teenager, and it was a great entry into retail. It also taught me the art of customer service. My love of fashion and home probably started with my mother who designed and built homes. I remember when she was designing our home, she took me to a lighting store after telling the school I had a doctor's appointment. I tagged along with her, picking fabric for furniture,

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wallpaper, and experiencing the whole design process which was incredibly special. And through my grandmother and her rose garden, I developed an awareness, appreciation and memories and love of gardening which would become an integral part of my career too.

**TB: You then shifted from department store to specialty retailing, but you also learned new product categories throughout. How do you think of your career in totality?**

**AO:** I think of my career like the warp and weft construct in woven fabric, or the rhythm and melody construct in music. The fundamental pivot points have been geographic and category based; these are like the weft or melody. The warp and rhythm elements are built over time through experience and wisdom gained at work and in life in general. Careers are not built in the ideal but lived-in real time. It is how you embrace the transition curve from uninformed optimism to engaged reality, almost daily, where the learning comes.

So, my career has been global and in various industries and business structures spanning retail, wholesale, vertical, digital, catalogue and manufacturing for apparel, accessories, children's, footwear and home. Every one of my roles has been a learning experience and it has all cumulated in becoming a CEO of a company at the time and place in which I can bring that full panorama to bear, helping to drive results and grow people.

**TB: And to what do you attribute your success in new companies, product categories, and even countries?**

**AO:** I don't think you have a career as much as build a career. I also believe "you can't trickle

upwards," by which I mean you must try to work with people and in situations you respect and learn from. Businesses are built by people, so developing a business, being involved in the business at any level, is about learning and being coached by professionals and people with vision, passion, motivation, and clarity of purpose. As your career builds, you yourself become more the coach and the developer, yet always staying open to learning from people at all levels who are smarter than you and also aligned with your core values.

If you live a brand's values and have clear structure around roles, goals, and outcomes, then you can essentially build the container in which co-creation, collaboration, and education can occur and the outcome will be top and bottom lines being achieved. And on a more macro level, I believe people, purpose, and planet drive the purpose and meaning of business.

**TB: You have also worked for yourself. Can you describe launching your own business and how those lessons learned contrast with those from best-in-class organizations?**

**AO:** The startup mentality and building from the ground up excites me. Again, perhaps it started watching my mother build homes or in my grandmother's garden. But the endless possibilities associated with a finite strategic framework... I very much enjoy extensive customer research and embedding myself into the mind of an underserved consumer. For instance, at Abercrombie & Fitch I was recruited to develop the strategic plan to launch the A&F kids' business. This gave me a unique opportunity to work with a well-regarded brand and create a complementary business that was targeted to the little brothers and sisters of current customers as

well as young parents who wore our brand. We had a very small, hands-on team to ensure that this had the important details of design, merchandising assortment, relevant product, visual store presentation, customer experience, all with its own distinctive yet connected brand voice.

Later, I was approached by my sister, Cheryl Krane (a venture capitalist) and a group of angel investors to launch Poppybox Gardens which was an aspirational gardening concept. We understood that gardening can be a little exclusive and uninviting for an amateur, but we brought a sense of fashion into the garden and built the team to deliver to that vision. Later, Richard Hayne, Founder and CEO of Urban Outfitters, recognized the potential in our gardening/home concept which led me to join and build their Terrain business.

A startup mentality does not have to be a new business, however. The role before my current position was at Sheridan Australia, a 50-year-old iconic home brand that needed to evolve into being an omnichannel brand. So, I applied the building skills I had learned to date, really focusing on shifting the business to become customer centric and ensuring that the product is relevant. I think that building a brand shares a lot with revitalizing or even solidifying a brand – it is reimagining a solution for a consumer and making sure you are meeting those consumers where they are... literally and figuratively.

**TB: Given your diverse experiences, you must have many colleagues and leaders that stick in your mind. How has it shaped your own approach to mentorship?**

**AO:** Professional discipline and hard work, when mixed with imagination and possibility, are fundamental elements in my approach to business. I know that I have expected this of myself, and now as a CEO I expect it in others. At the same time, nothing makes a career more enjoyable than considering companies and brands as cultures. Young people need to feel that they are part of something, just like I was made to feel that way in my early career. I'm grateful for the leaders that saw something in me years ago and leaned in to give an opportunity and support. All members of the team need to know they are respected for being human, that their time with their families is honored, and that they will never be judged for who they are. You cannot build a culture without a shared consciousness.

What is also critical, no matter what level you are at in a business, is to stay open minded to possibilities and to take responsibility for your actions. I have worked for and with great leaders, built teams I'm proud of, and been part of both business success and failure. Every move has been intentional, and for me it is not about the category per se, though it does need to be a category that I am passionate about.

It is also important to take the time to remember and retain the great people you have met along the way. Mentorship does not need to stop when someone reaches a certain level. My legacy is comprised of my teams, and so I often speak to people from my past because they are also part of my present and future - even if they are in a different sector or 12,000 miles away in Australia.

**TB: In this series we ask about the personal pivots of leaders, but logically those leaders have a knack for pivoting brands too. What do you believe brands need to do today to connect with customers, overcome obstacles, and achieve success in the current environment?**

**AO:** It is critical to be omnichannel and customer centric, to walk with the customer wherever and however they choose to meet you, to enable technology to simplify the complexity of what is required, to be passionate about data and use it to get better at what you do. Shopping has become more important to the customer than simple loyalty, yet loyalty will drive more profit from a satisfied customer whose expectations are exceeded. And that profit lets you build greater enterprise value. But you can only do this if you are devoted to learning from others, encouraging others to learn, and keeping a sense passion, product, and growth.

Today, brands must have a clear and differentiated point-of-view. They need to believe in something and stand courageously in front of the customer with it. After all, the customer *is* the brand and they are expecting this sense of purpose. Brands that love what they do and are good at doing it, can create value by offering solutions before the customer asks.

**TB: Lastly, in your current role as President & CEO at Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, what have you learned while leading this culture and values-driven business? And though our conversation is about your pivoting, can you share how you are driving evolution and new growth at MG+BW?**

**AO:** My role as a leader, and now as a CEO, has always been about building heritage brands

through the developing of people and teams - creating a shared consciousness, learning from others, and embracing others' learning journeys. Over the past 18 months at Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams, I have been focused on working with wonderful and tenured talent, as well as forming a new leadership team that will set the future strategic direction for the brand, driving it into the future. Our founders, investment partners, and I know that we have always had a very special brand and product - but we can still innovate more, market our key differentiators, become more customer centric, and further strengthen the business in this fast-moving world.

We manufacture a beautiful product offering for people's homes an hour outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Mitchell and Bob, from the beginning, have also wanted the brand to improve not only the lives of customers but the lives of their employees, including the designers and artisans who are working with their hands to create heirloom pieces. And so, we have hired additional talent that will help us to reach our goals, ensuring that artistry will flourish for the next generation and that our core values and mission are carried forward.

Every day we are asking, "What are new ways we can embrace agility and efficiency at the same time as artistry and quality?" - from the front office to the factory floor to customers' homes. We have real clarity about who we are and what we do: We are Artisans of Comfort for All and we are building a customer centric, omnichannel, modern maverick home brand. And we are unafraid to move this philosophy, one that centers on individuality, transparency, sustainability, and quality, through every element of the enterprise for the benefit of our employees and customers.

## About The Brownstone Group

*The Brownstone Group was launched in 2015 with a mission to offer the most effective executive search, strategic consulting and leadership advisory services. We introduce exceptional talent to brands and their leaders, transforming businesses and careers. Founder Tim Boerkoel possesses more than 25 years of retail, consumer, hospitality and luxury experience, advising and recruiting for startups and global corporations alike in their searches for CEOs, Presidents, Board Members and C-Suite talent. Brownstone, along with its global network of affiliate partners, operates as a true partner to clients ensuring swift yet long-lasting results.*

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