



Rebecca Atwood spent 2021 focusing on the company's trade-focused digital platform. Photography courtesy Rebecca Atwood

Business Analysis

14 Incredibly Smart Business Decisions Made in 2021

It's been a year of expedited change and challenges, yet many business leaders found new pathways to profit. Here, they share their wins

By Mel Studach

December 27, 2021

From every challenging experience come lessons learned. Following the pandemic's unprecedented impacts on industry as a whole, 2021 offered business leaders a bit of a better grasp on the new landscape to make informed decisions. For the design industry specifically, that new landscape is riddled with consequential challenges, from increased demand compelling struggles to scale to shipping delays emphasized by supply chain issues. Below, industry executives across categories share the business decisions they're most proud of from a year of expedited change.

Niche no more: Design firms expanded in hopes of being a consumer's one-stop shop.

Focused on becoming a whole-home outfitter, Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams debuted a number of new categories—outdoor, bedding, and home fragrance among them—in the span of one year. Plus, a digital upgrade made the new categories (and its first-ever [designer collection](#) with AD100 Brigitte Romanek) easier to shop.

“We embraced our commitment to allowing our customers to shop anytime, anywhere they want via our new virtual channel, through which they can purchase from us anywhere in the U.S., not only in our Signature stores.” —*Allison O'Connor, president and CEO of [Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams](#)*



Gale Singer, founder and president of Circa Lighting. Photography courtesy Circa Lighting

It's no secret: The home industry is built upon highly specialized skills—and being able to educate clients of the process is among the ultimate value-adds. In an effort to make designers' work a bit easier by offering both product and service, Circa Lighting hired a workforce of highly experienced lighting designers for trade customers to access at no cost.

“Our industry has yet to fully embrace multilayer lighting design as the critical element it is, due largely to the fact that lighting design is a highly specialized skill the vast majority of trade professionals aren't able to offer. At our core, we are a customer service business, so we thought the best way to tackle the opportunity was leaning into what we do best. We made the decision to invest in building a force of highly experienced lighting designers and made this service available to our customers at no cost. Now, all of our trade customers are able to offer lighting design as part of the overall design package for any project, no matter the size or budget. It completely changes the game by making something that may have been previously overlooked or avoided readily available to all our customers.” —*Gale Singer, founder and president of [Circa Lighting](#)*



Anthony Davey, CEO of Farrow and Ball. Photo: Laure Joliet

If the experience is seamless, people will—believe it or not—buy paint online.

After several years of prioritizing its e-commerce strategy, Farrow & Ball's hard work is paying off: Online sales now drive a quarter of the company's sales (up from 10%), enabled in part by a 24% growth in social media followers and more than double the amount of traffic growth to its website. Special collaborations with [Liberty](#) and AD100 designer [Kelly Wearstler](#) also contributed to the paint company's record 35% revenue growth in the past year.

"These results [are] a direct impact of the key business decisions we put in place last year and in prior years. Specifically, we re-platformed our website, tailored our warehouse and dispatch to facilitate a greater e-commerce focus, and have been building our social media following. This focus meant that when COVID hit and many consumers went online, we were uniquely well placed to meet their needs. We actually quadrupled our e-commerce business." —Anthony Davey, CEO of [Farrow & Ball](#)

Brands gave consumers the power to be their own creative directors—and proved they'll buy.

When L'Atelier Paris, makers of made-to-measure kitchen appliances, debuted a virtual tool that would let clients play around and think creatively about designing their own range, they weren't anticipating its great success. Lesson learned: The company will soon be adding hoods and island kitchen suites to the customizable program as well.

“We’ve noticed that most of our clients are very tech savvy and use our website for more than just inspiration, so we decided to create a configurator tool on our site where homeowners are able to create and design their own custom luxury range. For us, this tool has generated an increase in sales of 30%.” —*Ricardo Moraes, CEO of [L'Atelier Paris](#)*

At Artistic Tile, whose strategically well-stocked stone and glass warehouse helped avoid major supply chain issues, a new tailored mosaic series dubbed [Made in America](#) offers personalization options using in-stock supply at a time when disruptions made custom creation a challenge elsewhere.

“Reducing delivery times was the primary reason we became an import and distribution company to begin with, so it has always been our policy to have our items on-hand. When we began to see issues affecting the entire supply chain, we saw the writing on the wall. We leveraged a warehouse stocked with a curated collection of the most beautiful natural stone in the world, sourced from four continents, an amazing design team led by Nancy and Zach Epstein, an in-house crew of gifted mosaic artisans working out of our Secaucus, New Jersey, headquarters, and we made something new.” —*Michael Epstein, president and CMO of [Artistic Tile](#)*

Businesses offered custom products to the hyperlocal consumer.

Investing in a hyperlocalized retail expansion, digital-first custom framer Framebridge grew its Northeast footprint in 2021 with 10 new storefronts and the opening of a second manufacturing facility—this time in Moorestown, New Jersey—to sustain quick turnaround times.

Susan Tynan, founder and CEO of Framebridge. Photography courtesy Framebridge



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“When we’re located next to your other errands, we make it easy to frame more. Several neighborhood locations within a market is a key part of that strategy—and it’s exciting for us to see that so many neighborhoods can support a Framebridge store with their wonderful art and artifacts. Even our online customers sometimes want to pop into a store and see a frame style or drop off art in person.” —*Susan Tynan, founder and CEO of [Framebridge](#)*

Vertical integration helped alleviate supply chain stress.

Many industry manufacturers felt—and, let’s be honest, continue to feel—the stress of material shortages compounded by shipping delays this year. Silver linings came to those who were quick to integrate fabrication processes in-house, such as modern lighting maker Cerno.



Kelly Porter and Bridgett Cochran, founders of Porter Teleo. Photo: Paul Versluis

“Like everyone, we reflected on some of our successful decisions and decided to keep the path, reinvest in ourselves, bring on more people, and increase our vertical integrated capabilities. We purchased a new laser CNC [machine], and now we are doing all our powder-coating in-house. Cerno has always been a truly vertically integrated company with raw materials coming in and finished products going out. We expanded our toolbox to make us even more vertical and less reliant on others, so we didn’t experience a lot of the supply chain problems.” —*Bret Englander, cofounder of Cerno*

The best investment? Educating the future of design.

With the launch of an apprenticeship program, artisan fabric and wallpaper maker Porter Teleo is invested in the future of skilled tradespeople.

“In 2021, our most important decision was in starting our Porter Teleo apprenticeship program. We created new, entry-level positions to assist our studio artists, introducing and training newer-wave employees to our artisanal craft and fine art practices. In doing so, we have been able to educate and support younger generations of artists studying in higher education, all while finding incredible talent. Supporting the arts is not only a good business practice for our brand, but it also allows us to express values, build bridges between cultures, and add beauty to our communities.” —*Kelly Porter and Bridgett Cochran, founders of Porter Teleo*



Officine Gullo's multigenerational leadership, including (from left) Pietro Gullo, founder Carmelo Gullo, Grazia Greco, Matteo Gullo, and Andrea Gullo. Photo: Mattia Aquila

When increased demand and growth exposed the difficulties of training new artisans, Officine Gullo solved its immediate concerns and then looked one step ahead: The manufacturer of handmade appliances is now working on opening an arts school to preserve traditional techniques for generations to come.

“Since our products are completely handmade, it is very difficult to enlarge the production capacity. Because of this, we are working on opening a school of art and craft where we can teach new generations the traditional techniques that have been used in Florence since the Renaissance and that now are used by old artisans to make our kitchens. In today’s world, where everything is just-ready, we are a company that loves to make unique pieces.” —*Matteo Gullo, managing director of the U.S. market for Officine Gullo*

What’s good for employees and clients is good for business, as learned by those leading with an all-ears approach.

Own” custom rug designer tool, implementing real-time design consultations via the Hero virtual chat, and enhancing its LAB platform with educational resources. Yet for CEO James Suess, it’s the company’s strides in community that have proven the most meaningful.

“In the past year, we inaugurated a ‘Brand Design Council’ made up of designers and tastemakers, who are leaders within the interiors industry. We are working with this talented panel to have an open and honest dialogue about our changing industry and how to adjust to new trends and behaviors within the interiors world, as well as adapting our approach to solve gaps in the market.” —*James Seuss, CEO of the Rug Company*



Legacy carpet maker Stark opened the suggestions box to team members and clients before making any strategic decisions amid a disruptive year—a decision that led to increased demand driven by an all-hands-onboard enthusiasm.

Chad Stark, CEO of Stark.
Photography courtesy Stark

“We surveyed, listened, and acted on employee and client feedback more than ever before, which created energy and excitement that enabled us to grow our business faster and handle increased demand. Whether it was listening to team member needs around a flexible work schedule or creating more consistent onboarding and training programs, or reacting to clients’ requests for different size samples and more consistency in delivery windows, the feedback from our team members and clients has directed our strategy more than ever. The result is happier and more engaged teams, which leads to happier and more engaged clients.” –*Chad Stark, CEO of [Stark](#)*

Reclusive times validated businesses’ investment in digital.

The pandemic exposed the cracks in industries everywhere. In the home space, one of the greatest divides revealed itself in the brands who had productive digital platforms in place and those that did not.

“Our smartest decision was to use this time to invest in our future by refreshing our visual identity and website. Our entire year focused on getting clear on our vision, values, and new identity (visual and language), so we could create a new website for our trade customers that prioritizes their shopping experience. This includes a trade-exclusive website with access to trade pricing and complimentary swatches, real-time stock, easier sourcing through sorting features, additional resources like our wallpaper calculator, and an inspiration section that highlights our customers’ finished projects. We took our time to get clear on our strategy and vision, always keeping in mind our customers’ needs.” –*Rebecca Atwood, founder and creative director of [Rebecca Atwood](#)*



Thomas Lavin, founder of Thomas Lavin. Photo: Don Flood

Though enhancing the showroom experience was a big part of Thomas Lavin's year, it was the multiline showroom's digital expansions that drew the most attention.

"Since we couldn't be together in person, we upped our Instagram game to stay in touch. I finally made my debut! Between hosting our '20 Seconds With TL' collection previews and the live 'Fridays at 5' I did with Una Malan, where we played piano, mixed cocktails, etcetera, I almost felt like the world hadn't completely stopped." — *Thomas Lavin, founder of [Thomas Lavin](#)*

Design centers have traditionally upheld the values of brick and mortar, where in-person viewing and relationship-based sourcing reign. These days, the New York Design Center is building upon its value proposition by investing in online lead generation for its directory of brands.

"This year, as 'in-person' shopping returned, it was imperative that our digital footprint expand our reach for both information and sales. By investing in our website and using it as a tool for users to learn about our offerings, search and directly inquire about products, we are able to invite guests into 200 Lex 24/7. Our goal is to continue to bridge the gap between the physical and digital and to create tools to serve our showrooms, the design community, and future clients." —*Jim Druckman, president and CEO of [New York Design Center](#)*