

# Luxury in profile

By Meagan Kelly

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Alexander Karolik-Shlaen has always had extravagant taste. In fact, you could say luxury runs through his veins. Shlaen's family tree traces back to Central Europe, where his ancestors were well-known wine traders and landlords, catering to wealthy aristocrats and royalty. His grandmother was a fashion designer in the early 20th century.

Shlaen is carrying on the family tradition with his own company. He owns Panache Management, a Singapore-based business that represents manufacturers of luxury and branded products looking to strengthen their niche market in Asia.

"These companies are usually independent manufacturers or producers who do not belong to any of the "big-three" conglomerates in their field and are usually lacking an intimate knowledge of Asia Pacific markets," says Shlaen. "Trying to go it all alone proves a major drain on these companies and often ends up in failure and a waste of resources, including both time and money."

That's why Shlaen founded Panache Management a decade ago in Hong Kong. Before that, he was in Japan, crafting his style of "East meets West" business management. He also served on the board of directors for Brinks Japan, a joint venture between Nissho Iwai Corporation (at that time the sixth largest company in the world) and Brinks Inc (a Fortune500 US corporation). He holds an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management in Illinois, USA, and from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, touted as the number one management program in the world.

Shlaen's Panache Management represents companies that have superb and exquisite products, outstanding in their given niche markets. Some are actually leaders in their markets, but most are initially unknown in Asia. Without companies like Shlaen's, the only other way for foreign branded businesses producing quality goods to succeed in Asia is to set-up a full scale operation. Expatriate executives would be assigned from the head-

office, but they are often unfamiliar with the new environment. Moreover, rent and other major overhead expenses make it difficult for an enterprise to succeed in the lucrative Asia Pacific arena.

"We are fully committed to the success of our clients throughout the entire process of finding the right partners; set-up of a partnership (a joint venture, strategic or business alliance) and finally and most importantly, seeing that sales targets are legitimate and met," says Shlaen. "For our retail clients, we bring to them the real exclusive luxury product line, the original craftsmanship that Europe has to offer."

Armed with knowledge and experience, Alex has helped catapult a premium home-decor company into the South East Asia market. He is the exclusive representative for Formitalia, an Italian enterprise whose goal is to take high fashion to another level: the home.

Since 1968, the company has been producing lavish furniture in Florence in the heart of the fashion district. An early collection was designed by world-famous designer Paolo Gucci. His daughter Elizabeth Gucci now runs the Formitalia showroom in Florence.

Shlaen realized the potential of the brand to make it big in Asia when he met a group of Formitalia executives in Japan.

"I remember how I was astonished to see the Japanese buying Formitalia's Paolo Gucci designed 2-seater leather sofa for US\$ 10,000. At that time you could buy a BMW in Europe for that price. But the Japanese understood the quality and rarity of the craftsmanship," says Shlaen.

He kept in touch with the executives from Formitalia, eventually meeting with Elizabeth Gucci at the showroom in Florence. It was not long until Shlaen offered to represent the company from headquarters in Singapore, showing the upper-middle class in Asia the exceptional quality of Formitalia furniture.



The craftsmanship of a particular Formitalia décor line makes Shlaen weak at the knees: the Tonino Lamborghini collection.

Tonino is the son of Ferruccio Lamborghini, the founder of the famous car company that fundamentally changed the luxury automotive industry. Tonino's has expanded the Lamborghini name with a company that creates clothing, luggage, bikes, and accessories embodying the Lamborghini lifestyle.

Forty-five years after his father started it all, Tonino has teamed up with Formitalia so that you can feel the exhilaration of sitting in the driver's seat of a Lamborghini from the comfort of your sofa.

The Tonino Lamborghini collection of sofas, office furniture, rugs, lighting and leather accessories and more is designed to evoke the spirit of the sports car legend. Each order is custom-made to reflect the modern style of the Lamborghini: special stitching, thick bull hides, ventilation holes like inside the car, and even steel parts weaved into the furniture inspired by the Lamborghini's parts.

"One can unmistakably recognize 'The LAMBO' style in its drop-dead-gorgeous cars, for example. It takes my breath away when I see one. Nobody else in the world could produce such design lines, such as in our Tonino Lamborghini collections. Its just sexy and ageless," says Shlaen.

Trendy and modern furniture is the focus of Formitalia, but the creation of an entirely unique product is the end result. Customers can choose from dozens of colours and types of leather, from Italian calf to crocodile. All of it is produced in-house in the Firenze district of Florence, the world's capital for high-quality leather. The craftsmen stitching the leather into the furniture have been perfecting their skills for generations. Nothing is outsourced, leaving the customer with a one-of-a-kind product.

That appreciation for premium quality is hard to find in today's markets, says Shlaen.

"If the so called luxury is outsourced and manufactured in mass production lines and can be picked off shelf with similar thousands of items in the back room, there is not much luxury left of the product. It could be a nice quality product, but it's not a luxury anymore," he says. "Our major challenge is to explain to our clients that we don't have a warehouse with all our products waiting to be shipped out. Each item is produced by hand, in-house, per-order. The real luxury is bespoke, our furniture is tailor-made."

Previous page: This colour, stitching, and metal detailing are nearly identical to what you would find inside a real Lamborghini.

Below: If the the traditional Tonino Lamborghini designs are a bit too bold for your taste, the designer has something for you as well. The couch below exemplifies some of the more contemporary designs offered at the company.



If you'd prefer a softer feel to your sports car inspired furniture, Tonino Lamborghini can also suit your tastes. Certain items are designed to be more contemporary, with rounder shapes and no metal fittings. Pastel-coloured leathers are offered, as well as high-quality cotton.

Shlaen hopes Formitalia will soon have just as much presence in Asia as it does in other parts of the world. The company designed the inside of the Viminal Palace in Italy, the cultural village in Qatar, and luxury hotels everywhere from Kiev to Monte Carlo. The goal is to expand the brand into the markets of Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Shlaen's opinion, Formitalia furniture fits perfectly into the lives of affluent individuals living in Asia.

"A businessman who is seated behind the Tonino Lamborghini leather desk commands prestige and glamour. It is obvious to all that this person has arrived. In the Asian context, the right image is as important as the connection base. Therefore, we want to be a leader in the business and corporate interior markets, as well as in homes and hotel décor," says Shlaen.

However, Formitalia is not just about commanding attention. It is about lifestyle.

"The products are so distinguished and of such a high quality, that they can last longer and even be passed on to the next generation of discerning customers," says Shlaen. "A total look, a luxury lifestyle that involves not only the home furniture, but accessories, bikes, golf bags and jewellery."

The craftsmen who stitched the leather into this piece have been passed their skills from earlier generations in the world's capital of leather : Florence, Italy.

