

BUSINESS

The Toccins, From Influencers To Nurturing RTW Brands

• The latest growth maneuvers by Michael and Alex Toccin involve widening the distribution of their LDT label and hiring a president to oversee both the LDT and Toccin brands.

BY DAVID MOIN

Toccin is a small fashion company with a big appetite for growth at a rapid clip.

"In this business, you've got to have traction. You never know what's going to happen," said Michael Toccin, cofounder and co-owner of Toccin Apparel Holdings LLC, along with his wife Alex Toccin. They're 50/50 partners.

Launched in 2019, the Toccin women's fashion brand, which specializes in classic knitwear, dresses, jackets and "essential" styles, currently sells at Saks, Nordstrom, Bergdorf Goodman, Rent the Runway, on the Toccin website and at other specialty stores. With an average price point of \$495, the top category is dresses, with bestsellers including tie-front silhouettes that accentuate a woman's waist, as well as cheetah prints and dresses with long fringe.

Just two years later in 2021, the Toccins launched a second women's brand, called LDT, that specializes in trendy, fun, festive

dresses and is named after their daughter, Liv Dakota Toccin.

After selling first to Dillard's, LDT for spring 2023 is rolling out to Saks.com; a few Saks Fifth Avenue stores; Nuuly, the rental and resale marketplace of Urban Outfitters, and continuing with Rent the Runway. The Lebel Group showroom was hired to represent LDT. With an average price of \$225, bestsellers include dresses in toile, parachute fabrics and in floral prints.

The Toccins also have an exclusive collection with Rent the Runway called "Rent the Runway Collective."

Last week, Jeffrey Brumley came on board as president. He will be overseeing, strategy, operations, logistics, planning and growth for both the Toccin and LDT brands. Brumley was formerly vice president of merchandise planning and allocation at Vince and earlier was buying director at Lululemon and director of retail planning for Seven For All Mankind.

"We never had a president before," said Michael Toccin, who serves as chief executive officer and creative director. "Jeff will be overseeing, strategy, operations, logistics, planning and growth. We needed someone behind us. There are only so many hours in the day, and Alex and I need to focus on our strengths. We need someone behind us leading the team so we can be building the brands." Alex serves as chief marketing officer and head of communications.

The couple met on their first day as freshmen at George Washington University, got married eight years later and have been together for 20 years. After college, they relocated to New York City. Though Michael studied criminal justice, he realized fashion was his passion. He interned at Giorgio Armani, Tod's, Oscar

de la Renta and KaufmanFranco. He later got a job at KaufmanFranco, where he was encouraged to attend Parsons School of Design. Returning to KaufmanFranco, he became vice president of domestic and international sales, oversaw celebrity styling and created a private client program. "I was there for 10 years. I loved the chase of getting accounts. I loved getting stores" to buy the collection.

Alex also attended Parsons, studying marketing while interning at Ralph Lauren, where she ended up getting a job in the merchandising department. She has also worked as a buyer at Theory, in public relations at the HL Group, and at Emily and Ashley fine jewelry, in sales. "While I was there I said to myself, if these girls could start a business, Michael and I could start a business."

The couple started a blog in 2016 called "Stylists to a T." Unlike other bloggers who charge brands for posting a story, a picture and a link, the Toccins felt that based on their experience in the fashion industry, clients would pay for a sponsored program where they would have to sign for a minimum of three months, or about a season's length. It would be a monthly fee rather than a pay-per-post arrangement. Their Instagram page, @alexandmichaeltoccin, has 107,000 followers.

"I wasn't going to post a brand one time and be done, if I believed in the brand," Michael said. "Basically, instead of brands paying us for one image, we created partnerships with brands. At the end of the day, Alex and I wanted to promote brands we really liked and wanted our followers to know about. We made it a money-maker. The concept was to create a one-stop shop telling women what to wear, how to wear it

and where to buy it. We wanted to see if we had a voice, but we built a following very quickly. The blog became the stepping stone for launching our business and it is still the platform for promoting both of our fashion brands, and anything we do in our personal life."

At KaufmanFranco, Michael saw women buying expensive gowns and cocktail dresses yet were missing something to wear to work. "They needed daytime looks that didn't break the bank." He also asked the chief merchant at Rent the Runway what women wanted. The response was wear-to-work dresses.

Between their work experiences, the blog, and their growing entrepreneurial spirit, the Toccins became hungry to start their own fashion business, first with the Toccin label and then LDT.

The couple describe their Toccin brand as "a designer look at an approachable, contemporary price, with classic pieces that make a woman feel put together," including dresses and jackets that can be worn together. It's been evolving. "When the pandemic hit, it pushed us to create a full Toccin ready-to-wear collection, with pants, tops, as well as dresses and jackets, and that's what got us into knitwear," said Michael, noting that knitwear drives more than 50 percent of Toccin's business.

The Toccins came up with their lower-priced, colorful, youthful LDT concept while visiting specialty stores in the South and attending events there. "Women would always say 'I got my dresses at Dillard's.' So I decided I wanted to create the LDT line for Dillard's," Michael said. "If I am doing a brand selling at Neiman's and Saks, why can't I do this at the Dillard's price point? We saw an opportunity and wanted to chase it.

"What sets us apart is that we move fast and are growing," Michael added, while declining to specify the company's volume.

"We have a true customer base and we are creating a product that is desirable, approachable, affordable. We will be profitable in 2023. That's pretty good after three and a half years in business. We're looking to build a legacy of brands."



Michael and Alex Toccin



LDT spring 2023 dresses.