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## How Tibi Designer Amy Smilovic Transformed her Business by Becoming a Creative Pragmatist

The designer celebrates 25 years in business at New York Fashion Week on Saturday.

By BOOTH MOORE  SEPTEMBER 10, 2022, 12:01AM



TIBI founder and creative director, Amy Smilovic. GEORGE CHEN/ENRWD

No one would say COVID-19 was a positive experience, but for **Tibi** designer Amy Smilovic, who celebrates 25 years in business at **New York Fashion Week** on Saturday, it was transformative.

During lockdown, Smilovic created an entire philosophy of dressing and being, which she calls “creative pragmatism” (she’s writing a book about it, too), a Tibictionary of her own styling terms to remember when getting dressed, and became an Instagram Live star, increasing the brand’s following to more than 500,000.

She’s garnering thousands of views for her weekly “Style Class,” now in its third season, teaching viewers how to closet purge, find personal style, and wear their clothes multiple ways, has cultivated customers who count, and increased her gross profit by more than 300 percent in the process.

“It truly is a community of like minded people! Amy, you are a revelation! I’ve started changing up my wardrobe and investing in a **Tibi** piece each season. They are always the pieces I go to every time I don’t know what to wear but always feel my best and the most myself,” one viewer wrote in the comments about a “Style Class.”

“Here in Mongolia people don’t know Tibi ‘yet’ but my friends, people I know, sometimes even strangers, ask me ‘how do you put on things like this?’” wrote another.

Smilovic is celebrating her brand renaissance by inviting her customers to New York on Saturday for her first runway show since pre-COVID-19. More than 800 guests are scheduled to attend, coming from as far as Mexico. Some of them have become close friends through direct messaging around the brand’s content.

“Pretty quickly, we were getting 30,000 or more views, and we realized people wanted to have a conversation about anything but COVID[-19],” Smilovic said of her style classes, and finally figuring out social media by just getting in the trenches and doing it herself. “I was able to really be so articulate about who we were and why we designed what we did.”

“We’re a mindset brand,” said company president Elaine Chang, who has been with Tibi for 10 years, of the impact of Smilovic’s creative pragmatism ethos. “We’re not tackling it like the self-help aisle of a book store, but we’re starting to have conversations of where to go with it,” she added, not ruling out a TV show potentially.

“CP [creative pragmatism] is about acknowledging we’re individuals, we have our own thoughts, and they may conflict with others, but that’s OK. The good thing about humans is that from different things you can create something new. If everything is the same, how do you create anything in the world? Amy’s very articulate about that. Customers will ask if she can talk about how to wear a wedge shoe, and she’ll say, ‘I can’t speak on that, that’s not my aesthetic.’ It’s been a thoughtful conversation about here’s our point of view and if you want to be a part of it great. That’s a very different thing than the catch-all ‘listen to your customers,’ said Chang.

Restraint has certainly bred creativity at Tibi, which Smilovic founded in 1997 after moving from New York to Hong Kong with her husband. The brand already had one pivot, from feminine and print-heavy to minimalist in 2012. There are 55 employees.





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Part of the survival tactic during the COVID-19 downturn was to pare down stock keeping units by 60 percent, and home in on wardrobe essentials like crispy nylon cargo pants, fluid trousers, oversize blazers, shirts and crew neck sweaters, often with a slight flourish, like a hole at the back, a cutout elbow, slit neckband or curved legs. Most pieces are priced under \$1,500.

The IG Live "Style Class" also helped the brand transition to more direct-to-consumer sales.

"We're not selling to all those department stores anymore, and the business is just so much more streamlined," said Smilovic during an interview at her Financial District studio.

It became about finding the true brand evangelists.

"It was knowing that the world was such a big place and that if we just found the ones that really thought similar to us that would be enough," Smilovic explained. "It's still not a ton of people, and it's not every Bravo franchise of a housewife, those are not our customers. We don't have really broad appeal, but the people that we appeal to, it means so much to them."

Smilovic has expanded the fundamentals line, or "Without Fails," as she calls the collection of tube tops, jeans, cashmere cocoon sweaters and more, and encouraged experimentation.

"People would write me and say, 'I've been wearing this for a while, how do I feel new?'" Smilovic said. "And I'm like, oh, try this ring on with it, or take the waistband and turn it under. It's not about going out and buying something new every time, it really is about taking what you already own and manipulating it in a different way. So that when you do buy something new, it's very thoughtful and you understand where it is filling a need in your closet."



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Of course, a purchase might be purely emotional, too. "I get that and I love fashion, but it's really giving people the confidence that we don't have to sell people tons of an item."

Shoes, including the stretchy Leo bootie and fuzzy faux fur Lola high boot, are a growing category, increasing 124 percent in volume year-over-year, compared to 68 percent in ready-to-wear. But Smilovic is resisting the idea she needs to be in every category.

"I don't have to be in the business of ironic funny T-shirts," she laughed, pointing out the "Frosty's" shirt she's wearing with her own blazer and jeans is from a restaurant near where she's from in Georgia. "Not everyone has to like what you're wearing, but what you're wearing should give you a feeling," she opined.

She has 117 wholesale accounts, including a number of multibrand stores such as McMullen, Kick Pleat and Hampden Clothing in the U.S., as well as her own SoHo boutique that opened in 2005.

"Amy has created a collection that empowers women to play with proportions and challenged our clients to rethink traditional staples in their wardrobe," said Hampden founder Stacy Smallwood. "Clients of all ages seek out the brand for its forward twist on pieces that still function in their everyday lives."

Smilovic wants to open up new markets internationally, taking her "Style Class" seminars on the road, with one scheduled in Paris at Printemps on Oct. 2.

"Milan and Florence are two of my top five cities on Instagram. I have over 40,000 followers from Italy, and I only sell in one store," she said speaking about the

Europe potential.



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She doesn't want any more of her own stores in the immediate future, but is toying with the idea of pop-ups, following a successful temporary Tibi fit shop on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, where customers could try sizes and place orders. She may also start curating like-minded brands on her website, whether they be fashion brands or something else.

All of it is energizing her for the next 25 years.

"There is nothing that could have happened here without my husband, Frank," she said of her partner and chief executive officer, who also has a background in marketing. "Luckily, we get along great. I also have Elaine and the best team. Twenty-five years later though, I still can't believe it. If we hadn't pivoted in 2020, I think we would have been toast."