



Meet a woman who has followed her dreams, worked against the odds, and became her own..... fashionCEO.

fashionCEO

*Behind the Brand*

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**Stephanie Johnson, Stephanie Johnson Cosmetic Bags**



Stephanie Johnson

## STEPHANIE JOHNSON

In 2000, after 13 years as an executive for MCI Worldcom, Stephanie Johnson abandoned her stock options and six-figure salary and launched her own line of cosmetic bags. Today, her cosmetic bags and travel accessories are carried in Saks Fifth Avenue and boutiques around the world. We were intrigued to find out how Stephanie went from telecom executive to a fashionCEO.

**fashionCEO: You've lived in Florida and now LA. Have those cities inspired your designs?**

**SJ:** I'm a big traveler, so it doesn't have as much to do with where I am as to where I'm going. I'm always traveling. I travel about 300,000 miles a year. I'm Always trying to get to new places I've never been to before. The process of travel in itself inspires me because I'm on the road and I know what I need. I know what I need on an airplane as a carry on, I know what I need when I get to the hotel. I want everything to be organized. I tend to carry a lot of stuff with me. I'm a big packer so if everything is organized its easier.

**fashionCEO: Your job at MCI is what caused a lot of the travel, correct?**

**SJ:** I was an executive that was on the road on a daily basis, but I also really love traveling on my own.

**fashionCEO: I love stories about people who know they're not comfortable in the corporate field and decide to make a change. So many people feel that way, but they don't have the guts that you have. Where do you think that came from?**

**SJ:** I do know that I was in a place in my corporate career where I was very unhappy, really all of the life had been sucked right out of me. I was a little droid showing up for work everyday with a sad, long face. I really didn't have any spirit left. So I guess it was after many months of that that I really realized "I'm unhappy, so I don't have a choice but to leave this and do something that's going to spark something inside of me." I starting thinking about it while I was still employed with them (MCI). This sort of came along through one of my travels actually. I was traveling to Thailand and I saw some beautiful travel bags there and I thought "well, maybe I'll import these bags. That might be a great idea." But they weren't interested in exporting so then I decided okay, I'll just do my own travel bag line. I was a huge fan of the Henri Bendel bags...the brown and white striped bags. They all match. They're great, but Henri Bendel is only in New York. I thought, brown and white stripes, I could do so much more. I could do something that is really fun and has a classic element to it. It would be something

that I want to have in my bathroom. I want to have everything that matches. So many people have cosmetic bags from the drugstore or something they got as a giveaway. For me, I wanted something that matched. We spend so many thousands of dollars on luggage and fancy handbags. Why can't we have a beautifully branded cosmetic bag line?

**fashionCEO: It's the simple things that are so obvious that everybody looks past.**



**SJ:** When I travel, my carry on bag matches my luggage. All of my luggage pieces match so I wanted my cosmetic and toiletries and jewelry roll to have that same interior component. When I open that suitcase then everything inside of it matches and goes together. My hotel room looks beautiful. The bathroom is all set up with all the bags lined up and they all match and they all look pretty, and most importantly they are organized.

**fashionCEO: Where did you find your original materials?**

**SJ:** My first two seasons I used upholstery fabrics and design house fabrics, usually used to decorate homes. I thought what a beautiful thing to use those home fabrics on bags. The only problem with that, (many of those) fabrics run about \$40 yard, so it sent my bags into the stratosphere as far as costs. From then on, I started selecting fabrics in different ways.

**fashionCEO: Its not like you grew up in this industry, so you probably had to make a lot of mistakes.**

**SJ:** I taught myself the whole industry. I had been in telecommunications for 13 years. When I decided I wanted to make a move and get involved in doing my own business, most specifically doing the bags, I had to teach myself everything. I didn't know anything about how to sell it, who to sell it to, how to manufacture them, how big a collection should be, what my costs be, what kind of profit I needed to be in business in year.

**fashionCEO: Wow, was there someone who inspired you to take this leap despite the fact that you didn't know the business?**

**SJ:** No, I didn't really have an individual that inspired me. But I did take it really easy. I didn't say I'm definitely going to do this, here's my business plan, I'm going to raise capital. My approach was much more organic. One day I woke up and said I really wanted to do this and I made a couple of calls in that direction. The next day I was having lunch at a restaurant and the waiters had shirts on with Turkish knots in lieu of buttons. I said that would be really cool if I could get those made as little toggles to use as zipper pulls on the bag. Everyday was an organic thing that just kind of came to me. I'd look through a magazine and I'd get inspiration for a look or a fabric, a theme that I wanted to tap into or a color that I was interested in doing. It was very organic in how the whole thing manifested. I haven't done a business plan to this day. I've never taken any outside money. I financed everything to date myself.

**fashionCEO: Doing a business plan can be intimidating.**

**SJ:** We're at that place where we're taking the business to the next level. I have a lot of people saying to me that now might be the time to do a business plan with my 5 year plan so that I'll have a path to go down. It is intimidating even though I've already been doing the business. I feel like, "oh, no do I have to do it. Can't I continue to grow in this organic manner and have it work out?"

**fashionCEO: So are you going to do it?**

**SJ:** I don't know the answer to that. I'm not going to say no, but its not in my top 10 list right now!

**fashionCEO: What would you say is your first really big break?**

**SJ:** As far as recognition in the marketplace, Saks Fifth Avenue was really the

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first larger department store that really approached us and said "we love your product, we'd love to have your product, we want to distribute it". To have a company like Saks be that interested in your product, really want to get behind it to endorse you, and support you in your continued growth is great. That to me signaled a change in where we were going.

**fashionCEO: What a high! Did you meet with somebody at Saks yourself or did you have an agent?**

**SJ:** Actually one of the buyers, the assistant buyer, came to a tradeshow and she really liked our product. It was about a six month conversation before we got in their doors and got an order. That is a perfect example of how a tradeshow can really benefit people. We still do those shows. I'm a big believer in them.

**fashionCEO: Where was that tradeshow, in NY or LA?**

**SJ:** It was in New York. I believe that was either the Accessories Circuit show or the Gift Show. We participate in both of those annually. The ENK shows 3 times a year in New York and the Gift shows twice a year.

**fashionCEO: A lot of people have a hard time getting into those shows. Did you have any problems getting in the first time?**

**SJ:** No, we didn't. It might be the uniqueness of our product. It's a niche, so there aren't a lot of people doing things in this niche. Cosmetic bags are a pretty small market. We were different. If we had been a handbag manufacturer or a jewelry manufacturer, which there a million of those, then I think the competition would be a little stiffer getting in. But if you truly have a product that has originality and is really fresh, then I think that the shows are eager to get you in their doors.

**fashionCEO: That is a really good thing for young designers to know. Do you have much competition now?**

**SJ:** We do. It's a small niche so some of the larger players aren't that interested in getting into a pretty tight market. Kate Spade has a line that sits next to us on the cosmetic floor.

**fashionCEO: I'm curious, who was the first celebrity that brought recognition to your line?**

**SJ:** When I first moved out here (to LA), I had sent Jamie Lee Curtis a bag (through a friend). She was my first celebrity contact. Jamie Lee Curtis actually called me and left me this beautiful message, this amazing long message. I think she had to call back and continue her message it was so long. Just saying that she adores the bags and she's seen them in stores in Santa Monica and she was so happy to have her own. The nice thing about our bags and the celebrity component is that everyone from Julie Andrews to Britney Spears is a client. We really attract a diverse customer. Julie Andrews and Britney Spears could not be more different, yet we've got a product that is exciting to both of them. That's cool.

**fashionCEO: Do you try and go out there and get celebrity clientele or is it organic as well?**

**SJ:** We don't really. I do live in Los Angeles so I have contacts in the celebrity world. Most of them will come to us or come through friends. We've had interest from a lot of different people and it's been nice. I don't know that it's (celebrity endorsement) what really put us on the map. I think our editorial coverage is something that has been more valuable. InStyle has done a great job with our bags. They have been really supportive of our brand. I think it's good to have the bags in the magazines. You want your product in the stores. So getting editorial coverage in a magazine helps you because the stores look at that. That's how a lot of stores find products to carry. So if you're getting a lot of press out there then the stores want to carry your brand.

**fashionCEO: So many designers say that the celebrity angle is what has catapulted them, so its nice to hear the editorial angle.**

**SJ:** My bags are unseen. There's not a photograph of Angelina Jolie carrying a Stephanie Johnson over her shoulder because I don't make handbags. She may have one of my bags in her handbag, but its hidden. So I don't get that celebrity catapult because most celebrities aren't photographed with a cosmetic bag in their hand. I don't think the world knows we have such a celebrity clientele.

**SJ:** I always love the stories when someone comes back from a wedding and they say "I went to my friend's room and she had your bag and I couldn't believe it!". That's always really fun to hear. But the bags are always hidden, like a hidden little gem that's inside your luggage or your handbag. Most the world doesn't know you are carrying Stephanie Johnson.

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**fashionCEO:** That's the nice thing about your bags, its really there for a very personal reason. Its there to personally make you feel better. Its not there to show off.

**SJ:** That is very true.

**fashionCEO:** You actually teach classes to budding designers, which is really cool. How did you decide to do that?

**SJ:** I was approached by USC (Univ of Southern California) to come into one of their entrepreneurial classes and talk about how I got my start and I said no. My thought was, are you kidding, hundreds of people at a class at a huge university. I'm terrified of public speaking, there is no way I'm going to do that. And then the Learning Annex approached me a few months later and I thought this might be the opportunity to overcome my public speaking fears and to really give back. Maybe just understanding that my teaching a class is about sharing and giving back might help me overcome the fear of public speaking that I have. I've been teaching the classes for several years now and its been great. My sister came to the first class I taught. She said "Are you crazy, why are you teaching all these people to be your competitors?" I guess I never think of it that way. I have a friend who is a huge success in the t-shirt business named Charlotte Tarantola. She and her sister Chris have been huge mentors for me. Anything I need, any information on how to run a business, they have been so generous in being there for me. I really appreciated that, so I guess teaching at the Learning Annex has been one way that I've been able to share that information.

**"I don't think the world knows we have such a celebrity clientele."**

**SJ:** The number one question I get in the class is how do you protect yourself from someone stealing your designs and your ideas. I've always been laissez-faire about that. If somebody decides to take my bag design and run with it, then I just move on to something else. It kind of pushes me to go into a fresh, new direction. I always look at it as a positive. Having said that, one of the mistakes that I've made as an employer, is not to have confidentiality agreements or non-compete agreements. Maybe I'm too trusting. Unfortunately that has come back to bite me a little bit. But again, I look at that as an opportunity to rework my infrastructure and how I operate my business.

**fashionCEO:** Where do you have your products made?

**SJ:** They are made in Hong Kong. I've always had them manufactured in China since my very first delivery which is a little bit unusual since most people start in the U. S. and then they work their way up to Hong Kong. It was lucky really. My friend was sitting on a train next to a woman who manufactured cosmetic bags. I spoke with her and she said "you're really new and really small, but I love your concept. I'd love to manufacture for you". We've been together ever since.

**fashionCEO:** Anything new coming up for your line?

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**SJ:** I'm really excited about what we have coming out for Fall and Holiday 07. I have two lines, the Stephanie Johnson line and the Steph&Co line. In the Stephanie Johnson line we're doing a rich brocade in green and gold and also a gold crackle leather. It's not real leather, but its so beautiful. Its kind of a departure for us. Its called Hollywood. Our Steph&Co line is a more simple line. We're doing them in a sparkle metallic in brown and gunmetal. We're really excited about those collections!

Visit the official Stephanie Johnson website - [www.stephaniejohnson.com](http://www.stephaniejohnson.com)

**Interview by fashionCEO correspondent Janice Jensen.**

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