

Marty Staff Remembered for His Love of Life, Business Acumen

The longtime industry executive succumbed to brain cancer on Tuesday.

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Marty Staff

Fun-loving, free-spirited and charismatic with a lightning-quick intellect and the ability to think outside the box. That's the way industry executives recalled Marty Staff, the longtime fashion industry executive who died Tuesday at age 70 after a battle with brain cancer.

Staff had worked for some of the industry's biggest names over the course of his 30-plus-year career including Bloomingdale's, Polo Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss, Calvin Klein and BCBG Max Azria, and his former colleagues were quick to praise his skills and dedication on Wednesday.

Jeff Gennette, chief executive officer of Macy's Inc., said: "Marty was a legend: driven, colorful, irreverent, unpredictable. He thought big and made big things happen. He made you laugh and made you think. Marty was one of a kind and will be missed."

Calvin Klein said Wednesday: "I'm very saddened by the news of Marty's passing. Marty was an extraordinary executive who stood above the crowd and had a larger-than-life personality. When we worked together, he always got the job done, while everyone fell in love with him. Marty loved life and would occasionally take a walk on the wild side. May he rest in peace."

Barry Schwartz, former chairman of Calvin Klein, said Staff worked for him for 10 years and was pretty business-like during his tenure. "He did a very good job in a number of areas. We hired him to head licensing and retail and his job morphed more into licensing," said Schwartz. "We were pretty close," he continued, recalling how they worked together to negotiate a new deal with Japan for the brand and they traveled there together every three months for two years. "Marty was a free spirit. He was a wild guy. He was terrific and fun to be with. I'll miss him."

Ron Frasch, the former president and chief merchandising officer of Saks Fifth Avenue, said: "Marty was always the most fun person in the room — full of life, laughs and wonderment. I can't remember anything being off limits to him. But deep inside, he was an extremely bright and creative guy who knew how to build businesses in creative means. He truly loved life and, I am sure, got the most out of his time on earth."

David Fisher, the former head of men's wear for Bloomingdale's, said: "I knew Marty for so many years in so many different capacities that it's hard to imagine the fashion industry without him. He was a very nonconforming presence in the C-suites of the companies he ran and helped build. Not just because of the way he dressed or the color of his hair, but for a lightning-quick intellect and a business-building creativity that matched it. He was a risk taker, and loved rolling the dice on business opportunities and people. He won a lot and lost some, too.

"I would venture to say that Hugo Boss owes its deep penetration into American men's retail to Marty Staff, period. That could probably be said for several big companies over the years. Marty had a magnificent zest for life, and wanted to experience it to the fullest. A true entrepreneur, he thought big and swung for the fences, and in the end, he did it all."

Paul Rosengard, executive vice president at True Religion and a retail industry veteran, said, "Marty was a larger-than-life character; a throwback to when merchants ruled our industry. Marty was the wholesale equivalent of Marvin Traub, he understood that great product wasn't enough. We were also in the entertainment and theater business. And if Marty was at an event, that venue instantly became the 'It' place. He was like Mastercard: He was everywhere you wanted to be. He had impact, he created value, he had a huge heart, and he will be greatly missed."

Tony Lucia, founder of Jam Clothing Co., a fashion consulting firm, and former CEO of Hugo Boss, said: "I had the privilege of working with Marty at both Calvin Klein and Hugo Boss. He was an extremely talented visionary who created the direction for growth and ultimately helped both become power brands. He was loved by all his employees who cherished his leadership and

friendship. There are three Marty quotes that I will remember forever: ‘Deliver what you promise internally and externally; err on the side of doing more volume, and I will give you all the credit for success and will take the blame if we fail.’ If you met him once, you will remember him forever.”

Also memorable were the parties he hosted at MAGIC in Las Vegas, which were definitely the hottest ticket in town back in the day. Lucia recalled: “Marty wanted to bring back the fun. It was at a time when the industry was getting old and marketing to an older customer. Our concept was to market young and you will get an older customer. If we continued to market old, we would never get a younger customer. The parties were linked to young Hollywood and included great DJs and musicians. He wanted every account to come along for the ride and to be part of the movement, which created a great buzz and ultimately reached the end consumer.”



The executive was 70 when he died on Tuesday.

Allen Ellinger, senior managing partner of MMG Advisors, also remembered Staff fondly. “Marty was one of our industry’s most charismatic, free-spirited, independent-thinking, master, merchant marketers — and a great friend to many of us in the industry.”

Ken Giddon, president of Rothmans men’s store, said: “In my opinion, Marty was the smartest and most creative person in the industry. I admired the way his mind worked, seeing opportunities when others saw obstacles, and having fun while taking on established norms. Among his many innovations, he was an early adopter of ‘influencer’ marketing when the concept did not even exist.

‘When Marty called, you always had to listen. He was a force of nature, the ‘mad genius’ of our industry, and I am honored to have called him a friend.”

Dana Katz, owner of Miltons men’s stores in Massachusetts, said of Staff: “He was as colorful as they come, and always had something witty to say about everything. Most impressive was how he made you feel, how he built great teams of talented people who executed his vision so well, and how much fun he and everyone had all along the way. He was like that display window trimmed in such a manner as to stop and capture the attention of passersby. I’m forever grateful to Marty for the Hugo Boss and Joseph Abboud businesses he helped us develop at Miltons. May his memory always be for a blessing.”

Michael Setola, CEO of Tharanco Lifestyles, said, “Marty’s persona projected and portrayed so much of the energy of the apparel space, especially in the ’90s. He had the vision for what was coming next and the courage to chase it. His influence on so many who worked with him is deep reaching across wholesale and retail executives everywhere.”

Dan Leppo, executive vice president and general merchandise manager of men’s and home for Bloomingdale’s, said: “Marty was truly one of a kind. He believed that the image around a brand was as important as the product the brand was selling. Many remember the crazy parties during his tenure at Boss out in Vegas, or during men’s fashion week in New York. Those parties were Marty screaming to the world, ‘Our brand is cool and hip.’ He made the market look at them differently, and it worked. I remember going up to the old Boss offices in Olympic Tower before Marty took over and walking by a room where they were outfitting an unknown actor. Four years later, I walked into the Starrett Lehigh offices and they were dressing Dennis Hopper, who stayed for the party. That was 100 percent Marty. He made the elder statesman of cool in Hollywood want to wear his clothes and then stay for the party. The world is a little less fun without him.”

Randy Fields, who was vice president of merchandising under Staff at both Calvin Klein and **Joseph Abboud**, said: “Marty, the man is frequently overshadowed by Marty, the legend. I knew and worked with them both for over 25 years. But it is the man with his sense of humor, his intelligence, his love of nature, his generosity and his friendship that I will miss the most. The best years of my career and life were spent at Calvin Klein working with and traveling Europe with Marty.”

Kenton Selvey, who was senior vice president of brand development at Joseph Abboud and head of licensing and brand strategy at Marty Staff Associates, said: “Marty believed that fashion was about telling stories — and to that end he was master storyteller. He could light up a room with a joke just as easily as he could summon a brilliant business insight. From the outside, Marty had a rock ‘n’ roll persona that relished the creative hurricane he unleashed, but those who knew him best — those in the eye of the hurricane — knew Marty to be a kind and gentle soul, fiercely loyal to his friends and deeply empathetic. A look through his résumé will tell you about the brands he built, but he was just as proud of the careers he helped build.

“His defining trait to me has always been how curious he was about everything,” Selton continued. “He was in constant motion because he was always trying to learn something new or gain a deeper understanding. He asked a lot of questions and listened, really listened, to the answers. He made bold decisions, laughed off the pressure and loved the challenges of our industry. Marty was a mentor and a close friend and I smile because I knew him. He would hate the fact that after 16 years of working together and relentlessly teasing one another I get the last word.”

A memorial service will be held on Aug. 21 at Staff’s farm in Bucks County, according to his wife Robin. She also shared an address for those seeking to send condolences: P.O. Box 710, Springtown, PA, 18081.