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Has your latest project bombed? Have the past six months been a fast journey down a blind alley? There's only one thing for you to do, says Alberto Alessi, manufacturing maestro and the godfather of Italian product design: Revel in your glorious failures. Dance on the borderline between success and disaster. Because that's where your next big breakthrough will come from.

Alessi, 54, has followed that very advice ever since he took the reins of the eponymous family business in 1970. His partnerships with some of the world's best designers have transformed this 80-year-old company from housewares-trade supplier to design leader. You might not know them as Alessi offerings, but even a design philistine can recognize Philippe Starck's Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, Alessandro Mendini's Anna G. corkscrew, and Michael Graves's Bird Kettle.

But Alessi is just as proud of his flops, *grazie*. It's the duds that enjoy center stage in the company's private museum, where Alessi summons his designers weekly to discuss new projects. He has even published a book of prototypes that never made it to production. In a market that's crowded with the mundane and generic, Alessi says, the lemons reassure him that he is not veering toward safety.

Fortunately, most of the products created by Alessi's impressive stable of 200 free-agent designers are winners. The Alessi "dream factory" of 500 workers, which Alberto runs with brothers Michele and Alessio, has over the past decade raised sales by around 15% a year, to \$100 million today.

Now, having conquered our kitchens, Alessi is staking out our cell phones, watches, eyeglasses, and maybe even our cars (he seeks a production partner for a peanut-shaped, Starck-designed Alessimobile). How will he do it? By tiptoeing along the border between the "possible and the not possible." In an interview with Fast Company at the Alessi factory, near the Italian Alps' Strona Valley, he explained how to fail in style.

Where is this borderline?

The area of the "possible" is the area in which we develop products that the customer will love and buy. The area of the "not possible" is represented by the new projects that people are not yet ready to understand or accept.

Working close to the borderline is very risky, because you cannot see it with your eyes. It is not clearly drawn or marked. You can only feel it by using sensibility and intuition -- two characteristics rare in industrial organizations that are led by technology rather than design. One step more, and you risk falling into the not-possible area. So most car



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producers, for example, work as far away as possible from the borderline. And step by step, they all end up producing the same car.

At Alessi, we work as close as we can to the borderline and accept the risk of falling into the other area. Why? Because when we succeed, we give birth to a new product that surprises people and manages to touch their hearts. And because it is completely unknown, it doesn't have any competition -- which means we can enjoy big margins.

Is now the time to talk about taking risks?

At Alessi, we have risked more in times of recession. Because there was something to change in the industry or in our position in the industry, we found ourselves innovating. When the waves are not too high, we follow the waves. But when the waves become more dangerous, you may need to find something new.

I have to remind my brothers how vital it is to have one, possibly two fiascoes per year. Should Alessi go for two or three years without a fiasco, we will be in danger of losing our leadership in design.

But what do fiascoes do to the bottom line?

Our industrial organization is very flexible. We have a few best-sellers that sell more than 100,000 pieces a year, while others sell in much smaller numbers. They have a long production run, however, because consumer demand just never dies. In any case, Alessi is not a mass-production company. It's a research lab for the applied arts. We are not manufacturers; we are mediators between the expression of creativity and the real things that touch people's hearts.

And that means we have to experiment a lot. But doing experiments doesn't just mean doing the research and making a prototype. It means putting a finished product into the marketplace. Thanks to the flexibility of our organization, we can be profitable even if we sell just 2,000 or 3,000 of each product in a year.

In any case, for us, profitability is of secondary importance. Once we are able to defend the quality of what we are doing, then we can be profitable.

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Sidebar: My Favorite Fiascoes



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Thousands of American households have a chic Aldo Rossi Conical Kettle in their kitchens. But they never use it, because its handle becomes much too hot. The kettle is a fiasco, admits Alberto Alessi, and it is not his first. (That honor goes to a disastrous collaboration with Salvador Dali in 1971.)

"I like fiascoes, because they are the only moment when there is a flash of light that can help you see where the border between success and failure is," says Alessi. "It is a precious experience in the development of new projects.

"Our most beautiful fiasco was the Philippe Starck Hot Bertaa kettle. I did not realize that we had gone too far. Inside the kettle was some complicated but very intelligent engineering that prevented steam from escaping when the water was being poured. On the prototypes, it worked well, but when we produced thousands and thousands, it didn't work so well.

"The kettle was very much criticized. But it was never a stupid project: We just went too far. There were many positives, not least the courage of the designer. He wasn't playing a joke on the customers. He just felt the need to experiment.

"Our customers seem happy to take risks with us, probably because they realize that we're always sincere. They like walking the borderline with us. Customers are much more progressive than marketing people, distributors, or retailers believe. Society is much more exciting than just a target market. A target market is a cage where people try to put society. It bears no relation to what people feel and want."

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