



**An Interview with Fashion Designer Kara Mac and
Beauty Expert Ann Merin
Co-Founders of ShoeCandy™ by Kara Mac**



ShoeCandy Creator, Kara Mac

What inspired you to create ShoeCandy™?

KM: I spent my professional life as a fashion designer, specializing in menswear, for world renowned labels such as Ralph Lauren. I spent my time designing versatile products that would make men's lives better - classic sweaters that could compliment both a work and casual wardrobe, shirts that could go from a golf game to a boardroom. After 25 years, I realized it was time to apply my skills and experience to solving a problem that I, and many women, experience every day: "I have a million things to do today and need a shoe that can work in in all those circumstances."

What was the design and development process like?

KM: For a year and a half, I worked on the project. I sketched my ideas and did research through the USPTO (United States Patent and Trademark Office) to find that it had never been done before. I hired two different engineers and did rapid prototyping. When I finalized my invention - the removable heel cover and saw the possibilities for application - I knew I had something really special.

How did Ann get involved?

KM: Ann and I have known each other since we were pretty young – I think I first met her in New York City a couple of years after I graduated from F.I.T. through mutual friends who worked in the garment industry

AM: I grew up in New York City and had a diverse group of friends – some of whom went into fashion. As a city girl, I was always very interested in fashion so having friends in the industry was like hitting the jackpot.

KM: And Ann worked for Veuve Clicquot at the time so it was mutually beneficial.

AM: That's right. I was a Marketing Manager for Veuve Clicquot champagne and part of my job was going to these very high profile events that we sponsored. I had to go out 2-3 nights a week and I got to bring a guest so many of my friends ate caviar and drank champagne for free – which is a big deal when you are in your early twenties and have no money.

KM: Anyway, cut to many years later (I don't want to age us here) and we are both married and Ann is living on the West Coast doing this whole Hollywood red carpet thing.

AM: It sounds a bit non sequitur when you put it that way....I spent a number of years working in the traditional corporate world consulting for big companies like Hilton, Kodak, and P&G. My specialty was marketing and branding and I have a technology background and an MBA from Columbia. A job opportunity led me to Los Angeles where I met my husband who is an ER Physician. Between his unpredictable schedule and my 70

hour work weeks, we never saw each other so he urged me to think about starting my own company – whatever I wanted. I had a friend in the beauty business and we wanted to open up a salon/spa but I felt I should really do some research on my own...so I went to Cosmetology School at Paul Mitchell and did additional training as a makeup artist. That led to opening up my salon which led to a TV show on TLC which led to a lot of other things including a lot of red carpet stuff. I think we are caught up here.



ShoeCandy Co-Founder, Ann Merin

KM: I told Ann that I was developing something and she was really supportive before she even saw it.

AM: Kara was pretty secretive but I knew she was a very talented designer plus I knew shoes were involved and so I was just really excited. When I first received the product – I got a pair of Betty Boots, short boots with a $\frac{3}{4}$ " heel – I lost my mind. I couldn't believe how good they looked and how well the interchangeable heels worked. And the packaging was so great. The boots came in a big white box with a hand tied fuchsia bow that looked like a big present. I immediately took pictures of all of it, posted it on Facebook and texted Kara telling her how great it was. We spoke a few days later and I think my first 2 sentences were "can I invest?" and "how do I get more?" I was so excited about the concept that I offered to fly to New York on my own dime and give her all my best business, marketing and branding strategy for free.

KM: Ann got this great hotel suite and we locked ourselves in for a 48 hour brainstorming session.

AM: I called that session our first "Shoe In."

KM: After hundreds of phone conversations and one more New York City brainstorming session...

AM: The second "Shoe In"

KM: I asked Ann to become my business partner.

How did you choose the name ShoeCandy?

AM: As we took stock of where we were and where we wanted to be, we slowly came to the conclusion that we needed to re-brand the company. First of all, Kara is a fashion designer with a lot of experience, so I wanted her name to be on every shoe – like an artist's signature. Secondly, I felt that the product was such a game changer that it deserved to have its own brand name – it was that good.

KM: We started with the Kara Mac brand...Ann asked me to come up with a logo. It was kind of a daunting task.



AM: I wanted her to design her own brand logo because I wanted it to be organic and come from a meaningful place.

KM: I already had a Kara Mac signature logo and I knew the colors that I wanted to work with but the rest was a little challenging.

AM: Kara is an amazing illustrator and I had seen her work so I asked her to draw an illustrated version of herself. She sent me a drawing pretty quickly. She was seated with her long legs crossed – she's got these long model legs. I noticed that the legs in the illustration lined up perfectly with the lower part of the "K" in her Kara Mac signature – so I pushed them together. Kara refined it from there and added the heart shaped chair that she's sitting on.

KM: The heart is an important part of the brand. In fact, there is a heart on the bottom of every ShoeCandy shoe.

AM: The product name – ShoeCandy – came soon after. I had participated in naming projects before – but naming really is its own specialty. When you do it for large corporations, there is a lot of process involved and a lot of testing. I had to take that process and condense it. I offered up a bunch of name ideas and ShoeCandy just stuck and everyone we showed it to loved it.

KM: Part of what Ann pitched with the ShoeCandy name was the “kid in a candy store” feeling you get when you realize how many ways our shoes can be customized. The possibilities are endless and it’s just fun to play around and design your own looks.

AM: And I was excited about the marketing imagery – candy! – and the copy practically writes itself – “ShoeCandy - How do you want to treat yourself today?”

Where did you go from there?

AM; When I came onboard I had one very important request. Kara is 6 feet tall and I am 5’5”. I really wanted to develop a high heel. Luckily Kara already had an idea for how that would look.

KM: I had already sketched out that high heel but it still had to be engineered and prototyped. I also had an idea for another low heel shoe that I thought would be pretty groundbreaking – a sandal where you could customize the t-strap along with the heel.

AM: This is where Kara’s genius is really apparent. When she showed me the idea for the sandal with just the customizable heels and t-strap options, I was already in. I live in Newport Beach, California so a sandal that can go from day to night was already very appealing. Then she showed me what else we could do. She designed a strap in a triangular shape that would attach onto the t-strap – changing the whole look of the shoe. She also created a channel pocket in the basic t-strap that came with the sandal, so that our toe clips that work in our other shoe models could also be used on the sandals.

KM: Those sandals turned out so great that we decided to do a Kickstarter campaign to fund the production through pre-orders.

Was the Kickstarter campaign successful?

KM: Oh yes. We successfully funded before our deadline.

AM: It was a lot of work, but the Kickstarter format really helped us communicate what our products were all about.

How many shoe styles do you offer?



ShoeCandy's Perfect Pump

KM: We currently have shoes in 2 heel types – a $\frac{3}{4}$ ” low heel and a 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ ” chunky high heel – and of course all the heel covers for each of those heel types are interchangeable so a heel cover that works on one of our low heel shoes will on all our low heel shoes. We offer 4 shoe styles in the low heel - a pump, a boot, a loafer and a sandal - and 3 styles with the high heel – a pump, a boot and a sandal. All of our ShoeCandy shoes are what we consider wardrobe staples – designed in classic shapes that won’t go out of style. Our customers use our accessories to style their shoes to suit their particular needs. For example our customer can wear our high heel pump (called the “Perfect Pump”) with accessories in a class python print for a business meeting and then restyle that same shoe with crystal heels and jeweled clips for a night on the town.

AM: So our customer purchases the shoes but then continues to purchase accessories to style those shoes however she needs. And if she wants to try out a fashion trend, she can purchase one of the latest accessories instead of a whole new shoe.

KM: And we can produce the accessories fairly quickly so we can respond pretty efficiently if a style really takes off or if there is a lot of interest in a particular trend.

AM: We also have the ability to preview ideas with our customers through social media. We can post design ideas or actual prototypes of accessories and see how well our audience responds. If something gets a very strong response we can move it to the front of the line for production.

Where are your products made?

KM: All our shoes are made in Brazil in or near a town called Novo Hamburgo which is known for its artisan shoemaking. The quality of the leather is really unbeatable. In fact, Tory Burch did her first production run in the same factory we use. The accessories are also made there by craftsmen who do everything by hand. The artistry is amazing.

AM: We could probably manufacture things more cheaply in Asia but the quality of the materials and the workmanship is just so important to us.

KM: Really, I created this product for myself – as something I wanted to wear – and I wanted to wear this kind of quality. The shoes are just so well made – and made to last.

AM: And tell them about the padding.

KM: I also wanted the shoes to be as comfortable as possible so I designed them with tempurpedic type of padding.

AM: I have walked through many airports wearing our Perfect Pumps and my feet never hurt.

What other products do you have in the pipeline?

KM: We are developing one more heel design – a thinner heel – almost a stiletto but not that thin. We are nearing the finish line on that one.

AM: And then we will produce a pump, a boot and a sandal with that heel.

KM: And Ann is pushing me on a customizable purse idea.

AM: Well I figured if I change the look of my shoes then I should be able to change the look of my purse to match.