

# Forbes

## Prota Fiori, The First Woman-Owned Sustainable Luxury Footwear Brand Made In Italy Is Now A Certified B Corp



Christopher Marquis Contributor

Entrepreneurs

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Prota Fiori mission is "to preserve Italian craftsmanship with sustainability." PROTA FIORI

[Prota Fiori](#), a woman-owned sustainable luxury footwear brand sourced and made in Italy has achieved B Corp Certification. To meet the rigorous evaluation of the company's environmental, social and governance impact, Founder and CEO Jennifer Stucko and her team collaborated with MBA students from leading US universities as part of the nonprofit [B Corp Clinic](#) run by NC State University. The student team, led by Svetlana Geshtovt, began the detailed work on the 300 governance, workers, communities, and environment questions in April 2020 and after a wait following submission, they recently learned the certification had been finalized.

[As my earlier research has shown](#), the B Corp process offers Prota Fiori a powerful framework to build and accelerate growth in the future and also demonstrates the brand's ethos and commitment to continuously improve and challenge itself to do better.

With this certification, Prota Fiori joins companies like Chloe, Vestiaire, Patagonia and Allbirds. Stucko described that the certification is well aligned with the company's mission, "to preserve Italian craftsmanship with sustainability."

The footwear has a growing base of fans and has been worn by celebrities like Selena Gomez, A-list celebrity stylists and featured in fashion magazines like Vogue and Marie Claire. Prota Fiori prides itself on its feminine, timeless, and elegant designs, and by making sustainability sexy, Prota Fiori has a proven desire in the market for sustainably produced shoes.

I recently caught up with Stucko over email, below are the details of our discussion about the founding of the company, how it sources its materials, works with its supply chains, growth plans and its recent B Corp certification.

**Christopher Marquis: Why did you found Prota Fiori and what aspects of your background led you to do this?**



Jennifer Stucko, Founder, CEO and Creative Director at Prota Fiori PROTA FIORI

**Jennifer Stucko:** Prota Fiori, or "protect the flowers" applies unique sustainable leather alternatives from plant-based biomass and other circular materials to the luxury footwear industry like never done before. At the core of Prota Fiori, we are a mission-driven and values-led Company deriving from my personal beliefs. In 2018, after learning that fashion was the 2nd most toxic industry in the world, I became inspired to be a pioneer in the industry, with a mission to encourage conscious consumption. Prota Fiori reflects what I know, what I love and what I believe in. The brand has come to life after combining my decade of experience working at Giorgio Armani, Valentino, Ralph Lauren and A.Testoni with my passion for my

Italian-American heritage and deep rooted values of sustainability, health and wellness. A mixture of my business experience, professional relationships, especially in the Italian supply chain and manufacturing, and grit and passion for my mission and Italian shoe obsession have brought Prota Fiori to life.

**Marquis: How do you source the materials? Are you able to make the shoes full out of natural materials or for some things do you need to use chemical or synthetic materials?**

**Stucko:** My background in Italian luxury footwear manufacturing was my foundation for the Prota Fiori supply chain. Beyond that, I navigated sourcing materials and collaborating with my Italian fashion industry network based on a set of criteria which involves assessing the environmental, economic, and social impacts of each supplier. For example, my starting point is always with shared values. I have a checklist that weeds out suppliers that are not aligned with our DNA rather quickly. I ask for proof material being sourced from Italy ("made in Italy" is a core value) and applicable certifications for claimed circular materials. After evaluating if our values are aligned, I assess quality and scalability. Quality is a top factor, however, if the supplier does not fulfill the requirements based on our values, I will not assess the material no matter how aesthetically pleasing. Scalability is important because to make a big impact we must disrupt and replace the traditionally toxic fashion supply chains set in place with sustainable supply chains that we're creating and envision growing with demand we're experiencing from the industry and consumers alike.

We consider Prota Fiori to be somewhat of an innovation lab as we are always sourcing, testing, and producing new sustainable raw materials to improve the circularity of our footwear, which I hope to later apply to other fashion categories. Today, our shoes can be considered over 80% made of premium quality circular materials. These materials obtain certificates such as USDA Bio-based Preferred Certification, Global Recycled Standard Certification, Global Organic Textile Certification, OKEO TEK0 Certification, FSC Certification, PEFC Certification, Lenzing EcoVero Certification. With each shoe design, we work toward improving our sustainability.

**Marquis: How do you ensure your supply chain is equitable? Is it a challenge to find suppliers to work with the unique materials you are using?**

**Stucko:** A big part of Prota Fiori's mission is to preserve Italian craftsmanship, and this begins with our Italian design team, supply chain and shoemakers. Our manufacturer is a 2nd generation family business, and we work with all Italian suppliers. We support local designers, Italian craftsmen, and do not work with suppliers or factories importing materials or footwear assembly from outside of Italy.

It is a challenge to source suppliers because there are very few who've been able to apply the rare mix of premium quality, technology, and sustainability to develop a raw material which can be applied to the artisanal know-how of designing luxury footwear, a very difficult category. It requires highly skilled shoemakers to produce a premium product that is durable and long lasting yet also beautiful, well designed, and sustainable. A big part of what I love is introducing innovation to the traditional shoe artisans for them to evolve and preserve their craft of Italian shoemaking.

**Marquis: Why did you want to become a Certified B Corp? And what did you learn throughout the process?**

**Stucko:** In 2018, as I developed my concept and purpose behind Prota Fiori, I knew that the product would be just my entry point to build a Company that is a force for good on this planet. I looked beyond the world that I knew and loved, which is Italian fashion, at Companies like the Certified B Corp, Patagonia, whose values for environmental impact I also admired, and thought about how I could mix these two worlds' core principles together. My mission is to create an authentic sustainable luxury brand where accountability and expectations are met beyond our product. I set out on the challenge to do just that by pursuing Certified B Corporation status, hoping to set the trend for accountability in the fashion industry.

We have discovered throughout the process that I have many things to look forward to. We have only scratched the surface with our impact. Our Company is set up as a Public Benefit Corporation which means we are legally committed to put our purpose for the public before profits. Our core commitments are to have a positive effect on the environment, implement sustainable business practices and promote women in business. We were able to provide due diligence for the rigorous B Impact Assessment which led to our B Corp Certification, however, we have room to grow, and we will continue to apply the BIA roadmap and measurable environmental focused assessments further into the DNA of Prota Fiori.

**Marquis: Can you talk about how you are attracting capital to build your business?**

**Stucko:** Prota Fiori is built with intuition and vulnerability. Intuition is what drives me, and I consider it one of my biggest assets to building the Company, so I work to keep that clear. I did not have the personal capital to start my dream, however, I began manifesting and envisioning what the company would look like and took actionable steps to make it a reality. I trust this process in making my decisions daily, which can at times be scary, but ends up being transformational. I believe that when you are truly aligned with your purpose, can visualize what that looks like, with hard work and determination, anything is possible.

I have been strategic in creating a community of like-minded and sustainability-minded advisors, suppliers, clients and investors to join my mission. Since my earliest days in 2018, I measured up my team based on the spark in their eye for what I believed in, then based on how great they were at their individual craft. It is important to feel confident about everyone brought into the business.

Our early clients have been fanatical about our product and deeply inspired by our story and has led to an organic awareness of Prota Fiori. We treat client relationships like friendships with the vision that our story and shoes make women feel beautiful, confident, and feminine on both the inside and outside.

In terms of capital, at this stage, we're raising additional investments and seeking investors in ESG, sustainability, B Corps and luxury that are aligned with our value-system to increase the impact we can have — Italian luxury footwear is just the beginning of our journey. Prota Fiori has been bootstrapped since its inception in 2018, however, at this time our business is ready to scale with new retail and brand partnerships underway for the 2nd quarter of 2022. We're really excited about this!

**Marquis: Who else is behind Prota Fiori?**

**Stucko:** The growing global community that is behind Prota Fiori is something that excites me as a mission-led Founder the most. We have accessed a client base of women that love luxury shoes but are also eager to change their shopping habits and are curious about sustainable luxury. We've received broad support across a wide spectrum starting with our advisors such as Sandro Gastaldi, CFO Giorgio Armani Mexico and VP Finance Americas, Jessica Sibley, COO of Forbes, and Marc Hruschka, President and CEO, Graff North America, to our investor base, coming from the high ranks of Creative Arts



Agency, the top talent and sports agency in Los Angeles, for example, to Italian business leaders who want to showcase the innovation married to “made in Italy”, to our clients and women business leaders, especially from the women’s club I am part of, Chief, to manufacturers energized by the use of new materials to college students who reach out to work with us on sustainability on a regular basis to the awards received – it’s a growing and exciting time to be in sustainability and to apply it in such a genuine and feminine way has been a gift. This has always been my vision – to invite people into the world of Prota Fiori with the appeal of our beautifully made shoes and to ultimately consider what’s beneath the surface, and how we can all make a difference for a better world today and tomorrow. We need more Companies like this.

**Marquis: What is your vision for Prota Fiori?**

**Stucko:** I envision Prota Fiori to be a leading global sustainable luxury lifestyle brand, and a Company that empowers people to feel really good about what they’re doing, the impact they’re making, and vision and hope for a better world tomorrow. I am still stunned when I look at the Company today and remember when I started with an idea and shoe sketches, and little resources. I am very grateful!

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**Christopher Marquis**

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I am the Sinyi Professor of Chinese Management at Cambridge's Judge Business School. I research and write about how businesses are creating a more resilient and sustainable capitalism by focusing on the elusive triple bottom line of environmental, social and financial performance. Prior to joining Cambridge, I taught at Cornell for 6 years and before that, Harvard Business School for 10 years, where I developed an award-winning course on Social Entrepreneurship. I have authored over 20 peer reviewed academic articles and over 50 Harvard business cases on topics related to sustainable business, earning awards for scholarly achievement from the Academy of Management and the American Sociological Association. My latest book, *Better Business*, focuses on the potential for the B Corp certification and stakeholder governance models to reform capitalism. [Read Less](#)