

Name: [RAFE TOTENGCO](#)  
Company: [RAFE NEW YORK](#)  
Location: [NEW YORK, NY](#)  
Member Since: [1997](#)

## RAFE NEW YORK

DESIGNER RAFE TOTENGCO USES TWITTER™, FACEBOOK® AND TWO BUZZWORTHY BLOGS TO PROMOTE HIS THRIVING ACCESSORIES BUSINESS IN THE LATEST FASHION

Rafe Totengco describes his accessories label, Rafe New York – colorful clutch bags and totes, subtly stylish shoes – as a “stealth brand.” “I’m not one of those mega-fashion names that you feel almost coerced into buying. If anything, I’m the opposite – my branding and my logos are all very understated. I want you to wear the bag or the shoes, rather than the other way around. I’m looking to create a strong emotional attachment to the brand.” He grins. “That’s absolutely crucial when you don’t have a huge advertising budget to throw around. You want to make the most out of every dollar you spend.”

In the past few years, however, Totengco has found a way to compete with fashion’s big guns – if not on a level playing field, at least on a slightly less skewed one – thanks to the inexorable rise of social media. “Oh, thank goodness for Facebook, Twitter and Lookbooks.com,” he exclaims. “In the bad old days, if I got some amazing press, I’d have to email people all the time to let them know. It was so exhausting, clicking ‘send all’ over and over again. Now, through Facebook and LinkedIn™, people get notified of new posts and updates automatically. It’s a fantastic way to toot my own horn in a not-so-blatant way.”

Totengco has embraced with alacrity the opportunity to promote Rafe New York – and himself – via social media. He already has more than 2,800 fans on his Facebook page and nearly 650 followers on Twitter; he’ll send out tweets or posts announcing new Rafe lines or secret sales (“60% off at the online store now – run, don’t walk!”) to dramatic effect. “The evidence is very anecdotal and unscientific,” he says, “but as soon as we make those kinds of announcements our online sales really spike, to the point where we’ve had complete sell-outs.”

Totengco generates further buzz for the brand through his blogs: [canitellyou.rafe.com](#), where he describes in chatty detail the fashion events and parties he’s attended and the various celebrities he’s encountered, and [rafeloves.rafe.com](#), where he posts photographs of his customers proudly sporting their Rafe totes or kitten heels. “I just started blogging because I thought it was fun,” he says. “I didn’t realize how sophisticated it could be, for tracking and stuff. My early blogs didn’t even tag or link to anything. Now I’m hyperlinked and I can see who’s following me. I didn’t want it to be dry. I wanted it to be an extension of my personality, like a magazine gossip



column, but with an insider point of view. It's been seen by people around the world, and it's really gotten my persona out there." As for the [rafeloves](#) blog, he says it was not only an alternative way of promoting his products, but also "a way of celebrating the individuality of the people who buy my products. And believe me, at this point, no one is camera-shy. I've got a waiting list of around 30 girls clamoring to get on there." He shakes his head. "It's funny to think that people are now connecting as much with me as with the brand."

Then again, Totengco's engaging, effervescent personality seems tailor-made for a hyperlinked world. He was born 41 years ago in a small town in the Philippines; his interest in fashion was sparked by his two elder sisters, who were part-time models. "I saw the way they could be transformed by clothes and makeup. It was so exciting, seeing the power of fashion up close at that age. I became addicted," he says.

He started a successful clothing business in Manila, growing from one seamstress working on his dining table to about 30 employees in a much bigger apartment. He left for New York in 1989. "I always had the city in my sights," he says. "Back in the Philippines I'd be reading about

Donna Karan, Calvin Klein and Perry Ellis, thinking, that's where I want to be."

His decision to concentrate on accessories was a purely pragmatic one. "It was a case of 'one size fits most,'" he says, laughing. "I had no means to present a whole fashion collection in New York. I was fresh off the boat and had no connections. So accessories was a way for me to establish a business while producing something I enjoy." And he went about selling his first collection in 1994, with the same artless charm that fuels his social media success today.

Rafe New York has picked up awards and acclaim along the way — Totengco won Best Accessories Designer from the Accessories Council in 2001 and was the first accessories designer to create a capsule collection for the mass retailer Target®, in 2005 — but the brand's reputation was built largely through word-of-mouth. "It's happened quite organically," says Totengco. "I always design after my own aesthetic rather than some marketing plan. I guess I have one foot uptown and one downtown — my bags don't look like obvious status bags, which I think helps preserve their longevity. I'll tell you a story," he continues brightly. "I was at a café the other

day and this actress walked in with a five-year-old — that is, vintage — bag of mine. I walked up to her, told her I designed it, and asked to take her picture. She's jumping up and down — 'I love this bag, it still looks good, it's still my style' — which is such a compliment, because to keep a bag for that length of time, without trading up for this season's must-have, is like breaking one of fashion's cardinal rules."

You could imagine this anecdote turning up, verbatim, on Totengco's blog, or indeed the photo of the actress in question being posted on [rafeloves](#). There's a sense that everyone on the receiving end of a post or a tweet is a confidante, which has spread Totengco's brand awareness beyond his hardcore bag- or shoe-crazy constituents. "It's obvious that some fashion designers don't write their own blogs, or that they can't be bothered to update," he says. "I think that if you're not going to throw yourself into it, why bother?" But does he now feel the pressure to update his status every hour? "Oh, I'm not a 'just had breakfast, really full' kind of tweeter," he says dismissively. "I might tweet twice a day, or once a week, just whenever I feel like it. Likewise, I only post on the blog when I've really got something

**BELOW**  
*The designer's well-beeled creations*



**LEFT TO RIGHT**  
*Classic Rafé handbags;  
Totengco discusses details with  
colleague Steffanie Hyman;  
uptown meets downtown  
at Totengco's showroom*



**RIGHT**

*Esi Akaah, one of Totengco's design team, puts her vision to paper*

**BELOW, TOP**

*Works in progress*

**BELOW, BOTTOM**

*Debating leather swatches in the atelier*



to say. I don't want it to take over my life. I've had people say to me that they'd rather buy from a person they know is actually writing this stuff. But at the same time, I do have a day job!"

Given all that, could he estimate the impact that his social media presence has had on the success of his "stealth brand"? "I can't break it down in terms of 'We've sold 10,000 more bags than we'd otherwise have done,'" he says. "But it's been invaluable in raising awareness. Little pockets of customers have caught on to the cult across the US, in Europe, even back in the Philippines. The number of visits made directly to my site and my blogs have been steadily increasing, and online sales are exceeding expectations. People are reading my posts, finding out about my life and wanting to 'link in' by commenting on my blogs, following me on Twitter or by buying one of my products. I think it's a paradigm shift, and one that a lot of other businesses can and should exploit. I mean, having 20 people comment on a status update or blog entry, that means you've reached out and interacted with them." He pauses. "I guess what social media has done, more than anything, is help build goodwill for Rafe New York, and that's impossible to quantify."



**LEFT**

*Totengco's Can I Tell You? blog is a chatty look at what's going on in the designer's world*

**BELOW**

*Twitter keeps friends and fans in the loop about sales, collections and Rafe-related news*



**FOR MORE INFO ON RAFE NEW YORK SEE:**  
[www.rafe.com](http://www.rafe.com)  
[www.openforum.com/rafe](http://www.openforum.com/rafe)

If you're an OPEN Cardmember with a story to tell and would like to be considered for a future OPEN Book, email us at: [stories@openforum.com](mailto:stories@openforum.com)

## Ready to get more "social"?

To find more tools and information to help you navigate the social Web, visit [OPENForum.com/socialmedia](http://OPENForum.com/socialmedia)

**OPEN MIC**

Listen as journalist Tyler Brûlé takes a deeper dive into the areas presented in this guide. In the first of OPEN's new podcast series he'll be in conversation with John Jantsch, Adam Ostrow, Rafe Totengco and other guests.

**CONNECTIONS**

Gain insights, connections and exposure and meet all our expert authors on OPENForum.com

**OPEN BOOK**

Download any of the articles in OPEN Book: Social Media, as well as the complete guide, or forward the link to others. Previous guides on Online Marketing and Trends can be downloaded at [www.openforum.com/openbook](http://www.openforum.com/openbook)

**RESOURCES**

Find more articles and tips from the contributors in this guide and join the discussion by leaving a comment.