

Prototype

## Crème de la Cell: Six-Figure Phones



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Mr. Nuovo has shaped hundreds of products, including Vertu cellphones starting at \$5,000. As an executive at Nokia, he missed hands-on design.

By AMY WALLACE

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IN 2006, Frank Nuovo was 45 — “boom!” he says, “five more years to 50!” — and at the top of his game. Except for one thing: “I’d kind of lost my soul.”

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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

For Nokia, Frank Nuovo oversaw cellphone design for the mass market. For Vertu, he creates diamond-studded and other phones with high bling factors.

As chief of design at [Nokia](#), the world's leading mobile phone supplier, Mr. Nuovo presided over a huge team that brought 250 products and accessories to market each year. Among many other things, he was credited with inventing removable face plates, those colorful accessories that turn a phone into a personal fashion statement.

A sought-after public speaker, Mr. Nuovo logged about 200,000 miles a year on planes and was often interviewed by journalists, one of whom, in a profile in [The New Yorker](#), [called him](#) “the [Henry Ford](#) — or at least the Calvin Klein — of cellular communication.”

But something wasn't right. Everybody's heard of the Peter Principle, the idea that organizations tend to promote people to one level beyond their competency. But what do you call an almost-opposite phenomenon, when a person is promoted to the highest heights and excels at that altitude, but is left feeling empty? Whatever you call it, that's what Mr. Nuovo was experiencing.

“It was painful. Being chief of design at Nokia was a dream job, and I had so much invested,” he says, describing the creative crossroads at which he found himself. But when it came to hands-on design, he recalls, “I was talking about it rather than doing it. And I needed to go back to doing it before I talked about it anymore.”

So, four years ago, a few days after his 45th birthday, Mr. Nuovo stepped down — or up, depending on your point of view. Immediately, he set about re-educating himself, mastering new design tools, like [Rhinoceros](#) for modeling and Photoshop, that had become essential in the years he'd been busy with administration and corporate strategy. With Nokia's blessing, he also became a full-time champion of [Vertu](#), a subsidiary he had set in motion in 1998 and had been nurturing ever since.

Mr. Nuovo says Vertu, a maker of cellphones so high-end that he calls them “communication devices,” made him whole again.

Some may mock the idea that Mr. Nuovo relocated his soul by devoting himself to creating status symbols for the world's richest people. Vertu phones, after all, are made of gold, platinum, titanium and stainless steel. Some are wrapped in hand-tooled leather and ostrich skin or set with pavé diamonds. Depending on their bling factor, most Vertu phones retail from \$5,000 to \$25,000. (Special editions start at \$80,000; one sculpted gold-and-sapphire phone sold for more than \$325,000.)

To ponder Vertu's ruby bearings and laser-cut ceramic keys is to imagine Thorstein Veblen, the Norwegian-American sociologist and economist, thrashing about in his grave. In his 1899 book, [“The Theory of the Leisure Class,”](#) he coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe how people, rich or poor, acquire cool stuff to impress and to establish a pecking order. To this guy, even silver flatware seemed like wretched excess. Veblen would surely have seen Vertu as too-too.

One tech blog could have been channeling Veblen [when it declared](#): “Overkill, thy name is Vertu.” But Mr. Nuovo, an amiable Californian who lives in Bel Air and tends to wear black blazers over black T-shirts, rejects that critique. Beautiful objects are desirable, he says. And as

objects go, the cellphone is increasingly more ubiquitous than those old lions of luxury, fancy pens and wristwatches.

Vertu won't release sales figures, but Mr. Nuovo says the company — which has more than 80 boutiques in cities like Tokyo, Dubai, Milan, Las Vegas and London and is opening one on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills in May — is plenty profitable, even in these tight times.

“The watch is disappearing. And everybody in the world is walking around with these,” he says on a recent afternoon, spreading an assortment of cellphones — all of them Nokias or Vertus of his own making — on a table at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., where he was once a student.

If it is politically incorrect to have a finely constructed phone, Mr. Nuovo asks, “does that mean we are forever banished to bits of plastic?”

Not if he has anything to say about it. And this is the foundation of his happiness today: he has everything to say about Vertu. As the company's creative director and principal designer, he can execute on a single vision — his own.

“I made it very clear when I hired for this,” Mr. Nuovo says, recalling how he assembled his team. “I said: ‘You know what, this is going to be a dictatorship creatively. You can all contribute. But I'm not holding back.’” Vertu, based in Hampshire, England, has 600 employees.

The results of his unbridled self-expression are undeniably satisfying artifacts. Vertu phones feel good in the hand. They're just heavy enough to connote solidity, but not so heavy that they drag down your jacket pocket. They flip open with a slow, exacting movement. Their ringtone — a custom-made ditty that he calls Sandpiper — is the opposite of shrill.

Even if you start off a skeptic, as I did, you can't help but acknowledge that, like Montblanc pens or Rolex watches, Vertu phones offer something seductive — “addictive!” Mr. Nuovo says. You don't need one, of course. But you might just want one.

Mr. Nuovo, meanwhile, got what he wanted: a new connection to his creative mojo. Early next year, he says, he will show another side of what that mojo can do, teaming up with a Swedish company to start the F.Nuovo Collection, a line of premium travel accessories informed by the nearly four million miles that he's traveled on Nokia and Vertu business over the last 20 years.

Talk about R & D — Mr. Nuovo estimates that he's spent more than a year of his life in the air. While it's too early to give details, he says, he is sure of one thing: his new collection will be functional *and* beautiful. With not a bit of plastic in sight.

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