

# Interview

## Anything is Possible

An Interview with Tova Borgnine,  
Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, The Tova Corporation



Tova Borgnine with Tova Autumn Signature Fragrance

**EDITORS' NOTE** Norwegian native Tova Borgnine began her professional career as a model and actress. After establishing a Tova's Touch boutique in Sea Girt, New Jersey, she moved to Las Vegas, where she opened cosmetics concessions at Caesars Palace and the International Hotel. She founded the Tova Corporation in 1977 and has since won, among other honors, the prestigious FiFi Award (given by the Fragrance Foundation) in 1998. She is also the author of, *The Tova Difference: A Promise of Lasting Beauty and Being Married Happily Forever: 22 Secrets, 12 Strategies, and 8 Compromises*. She has been married for more than 30 years to Academy Award-winning actor Ernest Borgnine.

**COMPANY BRIEF** The Tova Corporation, based in Beverly Hills, California, produces high-end fragrances, cosmetics, and skin- and hair-care products under the Beauty by Tova brand. These products are currently available exclusively through QVC via broadcasting, Internet ([www.QVC.com/Tova](http://www.QVC.com/Tova)), or telephone.

**Did you know early on that you had the entrepreneurial spirit, and to what do you attribute that?**

To my mother, who brought me to the U.S. when I was seven-and-a-half with \$76 and a dream to go forward. Authors Renee and Don Martin interviewed me for their recent book, *The Risk Takers: 16 Women and Men Who Built Great Businesses Share Their Entrepreneurial*

*Strategies For Success*, and share with their readers my beliefs that anything is possible, if you really work hard at it and are willing to do whatever is necessary.

**How did you develop an interest in cosmetics?**

I was more focused on becoming a world-class actress, but part of the coursework at the Actors Studio in New York was learning how to apply your characters through makeup, and I became more fascinated with how to create these different visuals. I was also very fortunate to study with some of the master makeup artists that have gone on to win Academy Awards.

**When you first began marketing your own products via mail order, did you know early on that it was going to be successful?**

Soon after I had developed the product, Harry Scott from the *San Francisco Chronicle* came to interview my husband Ernie and I, and his first question to Ernie was, "How long is this, your fifth marriage, going to last?" and Ernie said, "By the way Harry, have you ever seen my skin look so good?" With that, unbeknownst to us, he decided to do a story on the product, leading to a rush of orders.

So I knew the product itself, which utilized the root of cactus, was way ahead of its time. What I wasn't as astute in was what mail order was about, except I knew it was held in very low esteem by the public.

**In terms of how the product evolved, did you see the market as a broad one or was it directed toward a more specific niche?**

As I started to market the mail order business, I made a couple of early discoveries: The initial article said specifically, "Ernest Borgnine's wife discovered it," with a picture of Ernie and me. When we did our first ad, I put it in *Vogue*, but they weren't fond of clip-out pieces – i.e. coupons – so it had to be at the back of the book.

I realized the niche was to go back to newspapers. So I was one of the first to use full-page newspaper ads for cosmetics in major newspapers across this country. We also had to see if we dropped Ernie's photo, that it was still going to work. So the niche was very focused around the method of marketing, but in the sense of people, it was broad due to the readership of newspapers at that time.

**You've broadened into different segments and perfumes within the Tova Signature Collection including Signature,**

**Tova Nights, and 10 additional fragrances. What drove that decision?**

We started with four products. The assumption within the ads was that customers were getting one, and that was the masquerade.

However, once we got our footing with the newspaper advertising, I determined we needed more of a lifestyle line of products. Catalogs were coming on the horizon, and we did an exclusive Tova catalog. Although the first one was beautiful, it didn't make much money, but got a lot of publicity. So my desire was to expand and explore as opposed to staying in one area.

**How did you transition from direct marketing to newspapers to the relationship with QVC?**

I met with QVC in 1990 to put my foot in with skin care. We had our first show in November of 1990, and then I tried the Tova Signature fragrance on air in July of 1991, and the rest is history.

**Was it tough to turn some of the business over to QVC in a sense?**

It wasn't until 2002 that we made this transition. I had a lot of tenure with QVC. As an entrepreneurial company, to keep the pace of the supply train was extremely difficult due to the fact that, in the late '80s and early '90s, banks were reluctant to give major loans to females. QVC was very helpful during that time period, because the demand was exceeding our particular budget.

**Are you still creating new products today, and how engaged are you in the future of the brand?**

I'm involved in practically every phase of the creative process, and now I feel I'm going to be more instrumental in the supply train.

**You touched on how important it is for you to speak to future entrepreneurs. Do you worry that we're not encouraging entrepreneurship for that next generation?**

Yes. I was on the Board of Trustees of Junior Achievement, and they tried to establish, even as early as Kindergarten, how you could begin a business with an idea. Junior Achievement continues to reach out to schools around the world establishing the true Entrepreneurial Curriculum K-12.

I don't see many other major groups out there instilling the idea that you can live your dream as long as you are willing to work for it. It's definitely something that is vitally needed. ●