

# Adam Cottrell

**Advertising Design BFA '06**  
**Managing Partner and Co-Founder, Blake Fox Interiors**

Starting your own business calls for some non-negotiable qualities—an unflinching work ethic, a self-directed vision, and confidence. The first, staging professional Adam Cottrell has cultivated since childhood. Growing up on a small flower farm in northern New Jersey, Cottrell spent his weekends tending the flower stand along with his two younger brothers. Working on the farm was “something you did until you had a job in the ‘real world,’” he recalls. “You work every weekend for at least a few hours, and then you do your homework.”

The vision and confidence came from FIT, where his love of creating concepts drew him to advertising design. “FIT gave me a great base to want to make my own aesthetic,” he says. “Some of my favorite moments at FIT were students and professors all critiquing each other’s projects ... It’s something that gave me a lot more confidence in my life.”

Post-graduation, he pivoted to retail where he worked as a floor merchandiser, rising up the ranks to Ann Taylor’s head office by 2015.

Staging retail, it turns out, is a lot like staging houses—you have to convey a brand’s feeling and grab shoppers’ interest within the constraints of the space you’re given, which, in Manhattan, can be enormous.

“You could work in Times Square, which is like a vast storage warehouse of space, or a little store down in NoHo and have to go figure it out and be flexible,” Cottrell recalls. This experience gave him the skills to transition in 2015 into his first real estate staging job, which he secured from Craigslist. After four years of work, Cottrell and colleague Tara Thompson joined forces to start Blake Fox Interiors (a combination of his partner’s middle name and Cottrell’s childhood nickname, “Fox.”) They launched at the start of 2020—a few months before the pandemic shut down most in-person work in the U.S. Still, the experience made his work more efficient—and by the end of the first year, Blake Fox had worked on 88 houses, “which felt really great for being a no-name business the year before.” These days, a typical year involves staging about 120 houses.

The task is to bring out the best in a building using minimal furniture and décor—taking away elements as often as adding. The goal is to make it feel “like a very welcoming space, no matter the style of home.” Prices start at \$2,800 for a mid-sized home, and go up from there according to how much work is needed. The homeowner benefits by selling the property faster and sometimes for tens of thousands of dollars more than it would have fetched bare.

“Design is maybe about 20 to 30% of the business,” Cottrell says. The rest is logistics and expecting the unexpected. One year, a home he had staged was burgled two weeks after he had set it up. “We got a call from the agent one Sunday, like two weeks after, and he’s like, everything’s gone,” Cottrell recalls. Someone apparently broke into the house in the middle of the night, and took all the staging furniture, the appliances, and even cabinet pulls. (The thieves left the fake TV.) Another year, a summer thunderstorm wiped out power in northern New Jersey for a few days and Cottrell found his team moving heavy furniture into a home without power or air conditioning. “It was late July and just very exhausting and tiring—but you’re the business owner, so you have to kind of chew it up and handle it, because you know you have a schedule that’s got to happen the following week.”

The reward is the transformation. “Hearing people’s positive feedback feels really great—to come home after a stage and get a great text from a seller saying how thrilled they are with the home—especially because I’ve been on that journey with them from the initial walkthrough.”

“I love having that control, but I got that way because of being at FIT,” Cottrell says.

