

PROTOTYPE OF LOTTE DOUWES' PROJECT.



PROTOTYPE OF RACHEL GRIFFIN AND ELKE VAN DEN BERG'S NAKED PROJECT.



IN THE FRONT SEAT

Dutch company LEOLUX has some original ways to convey its unique selling point – its manufacturing expertise – explains CEO FRANK VAN WERKUM.

WORDS MEREL KOKHUIS
PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEOLUX

Currently celebrating its 75th birthday, Leolux is an essentially Dutch company recognized worldwide for the high quality and ergonomic comfort of its leather seating elements. Since Frank van Werkum – previously associated with Vescom and De Ploeg – arrived in 2007, he's implemented an ongoing series of small changes. Van Werkum maps out the course he's set for Leolux and explains the rationale behind his decisions.

When you arrived at Leolux, what was your main objective?

Leolux is one of the largest factories in northern Europe producing design furniture. We have 500 employees, as opposed to our competitors, who have an average of 30. We do everything ourselves,

from constructing the wooden frames to putting the finishing touches on the end product. We operate a paintwork factory and a transport division. We make and upholster all the frames. We have our own showrooms. I realized there was practically nothing I could do to improve the company. My job was to find a way to emphasize its strong points. To focus more and more on the core business.

And those strong points would be...?

High quality, comfort and independence – we don't have to rely on outside sources. We use the finest leathers and put great stock in our ergonomic design. Functionality is just as important as aesthetics. That's why our slogan is 'making sitting a pleasant experience'.

How have you managed to accentuate Leolux's strong points?

By paying attention to detail. And by solidifying the company's prime position within the 'making industry'. As I've said, we're one of the few furniture companies that still have in-house facilities for making everything. Because the whole idea is so interesting, we wanted to share it with people. In September 2007 we opened a visitors centre for this very purpose, called Via Creandri. Our guests have the opportunity to follow the entire manufacturing process of a piece of Leolux furniture from start to finish.

What else have you been doing?

We noticed that despite the glut of young design talent around, these people



ELKE VAN DEN BERG AND RACHEL GRIFFIN PRESENT THEIR DESIGNS AT LEOLUX IN VENLO.



LOTTE DOUWES PRESENT HER DESIGNS AT LEOLUX.



STAND AT THE HOME FURNITURE FAIR, WOONBEURS AMSTERDAM 2009, WHERE THE PROJECT WAS EXHIBITED.



PRESENTATION OF LOTTE DOUWES' WORK AT THE FINAL ASSESSMENT.

'Women know best what consumers want'
Frank van Werkum

frequently have trouble selling their work. In many cases, they know so little about the manufacturing process that they design furniture which is nearly impossible to make. Nor do they give much thought to marketing methods. As a result of serving on the jury for the René Smeets Prize, I had good contacts with the Design Academy Eindhoven, and I suggested to the academy that we combine forces.

Can you explain your joint venture with the Design Academy Eindhoven in greater detail?

There are a lot of talented students at the Design Academy, and I wanted to help them. Instructors at the school asked their students to come up with an imaginary

subsidiary for Leolux and to make a suitable design for it. Although their designs didn't have to be anything like our leather furniture, they did have to be manufactured in our factory. The project gave these students a chance to make get to know the 'making industry' and make good prototypes.

What happened to the prototypes?

We offered the best designs a public platform – a selection of the student work appeared at the Home Furniture Fair in Amsterdam. We'll be showing these prototypes in Kortrijk, Milan and Cologne as well. And we have some 700 dealers who wouldn't mind hosting temporary exhibitions of these designs in their showrooms.

Sounds as though the students at DAE really benefited from this project.

Absolutely. Besides having a chance to make good prototypes, they also had the opportunity to make use of our employees' know-how. Rather than stagnating in the concept stage, their designs were actually realized. And they also learned the best way to show their work to the public.

And did Leolux benefit from the collaboration as well?

We like the idea of gathering together a team of good designers. Although we may not do anything with these particular prototypes, there's still the possibility of approaching one or more of the designers for the development of a new project at some future date. Or we might use one >>>



CAMPING IN UNBEARABLE LUXURY, BY DENNIS PARREN, DURING THE FINAL ASSESSMENT.

‘Young design talents frequently have trouble selling their work’
Frank van Werkum

of their other designs as a styling prop for our brochure.

Any other special attempts to draw attention to Leolux?

Together with the stylists at Kamer 465, we’ve made sure that photographs of our furniture focus more on the detailing. We’re now showing, for instance, that high-tech resources can be combined flawlessly with traditional craftsmanship – an unusual but powerful union. Leolux furniture is known for attention to detail and a perfectly finished appearance. Not long ago someone remarked that our chairs look just as good from the back as they do from the front. For this reason, quite a few people have treated our seating elements as objects, putting them in the middle of the

room rather than against a wall. We’re also working with a gallery that’s compiling a collection of art for us. We’ve been using the pieces in this collection for photo shoots, because we like the idea of linking Leolux to art. Art and design are both the result of creative processes that share a need for craftsmanship in their realization.

Have you changed anything within the company itself?

My main effort there has been to add more women to the staff, and I’ve got plenty of reasons for doing so. Women know best what customers want. At least 80 per cent of consumer purchasing is down to choices made by women. They have good taste; they have a ‘double purse’ – their own and their husband’s; and, finally, they look with their

hands. They appreciate quality. Our policy on communication is aimed primarily at women. Other changes include employing someone who’s involved in the colour aspect of furniture design, expanding the team with a genuine leather specialist and, more recently, bringing a designer on board to help us develop our trade-fair stands to the next level.

What are your plans for the future?

Not long ago we set up a Leolux subsidiary called Poda. Furniture marketed under this name is just as good as, but more affordable than, the pieces in the Leolux collection. Our target group consists of young people with good taste and modest means. We can keep costs low by offering a limited number of options, using less

PROTOTYPE OF DENNIS PARREN’S FOLD-UP SOFA, PRODUCED BY LEOLUX.



LEOLUX’S HEAD OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, HENK JEGERS EXAMINES THE PENNA ARMCHAIR BY JONAS LUTZ.



FINAL ASSESSMENT OF JONAS LUTZ’S ARMCHAIR PENNA AT DESIGN ACADEMY Eindhoven.



TUTOR BAS VAN TOL AND LEOLUX’S HEAD OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, HENK JEGERS, ASSESSING ELISE VAN MOURIK’S ARMCHAIR.

LEOLUX’S HEAD OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, HENK JEGERS EXAMINES THE PENNA ARMCHAIR BY JONAS LUTZ.



PROTOTYPE OF ELISE VAN MOURIK’S ARMCHAIR, PRODUCED BY LEOLUX.

expensive fabrics and manufacturing larger volumes. And we’ve decided not to spend a fortune on marketing. At the moment, we have a hundred dealers in the Benelux. Our goal is to continue growing. As far as short-term projects are concerned, this week I’ll be going to Milan with a couple of colleagues to gather inspiration. We have no fixed plan; we’re just going to let all the lovely things we see make their impact. Shoes, bonbons, packaging – any shape, colour or material has the potential to spark a new idea. ■



FRANK VAN WERKUM.

LEOLUX

WEBSITE leolux.com
LOCATION Venlo (NL)
ESTABLISHED 1934
AREA OF DISTRIBUTION Worldwide
ANNUAL SALES/TURNOVER €120 million
MARKET SECTOR Design furniture
BEST-KNOWN PRODUCT Pallone (design: Boonzaaijer/Mazairac/De Scheemaker, 1989)
BEST-SELLING PRODUCTS Cuno (design: Cuno Frommherz, 2008), B Flat (Andreas Berlin, 2005), Vol de Rêve (Jane Worthington, 2006), Parabolica (Stefan Heiliger, 2008)
COLLABORATING DESIGNERS Jane Worthington, Hugo de Ruiter, Andreas Berlin, Cuno Frommherz, Gabriele Assmann, Norbert Beck, Frans Schrofer, Braun & Maniatis, Stefan Heiliger, Jan Armgardt