GAME CHANGERS: DR ANTJE VON DEWITZ

Aiming at fair play

In 2009, Antje von Dewitz took over the running of German outdoor group Vaude from her father, Albrecht, who founded the company in 1974. She has built on Vaude's heritage and is carving out a reputation for turning its commitment to people and to environmental responsibility into concrete action. Its quest for fairness is now shaping the products it brings to market and how it makes them.

What would you say are the biggest differences between the Vaude of today at the start of 2018, and the company you took over from your father in 2009?

The main difference is that we are now a thoroughly sustainable company. We even have our own eco-label, Green Shape, and the standards required for a product to achieve inclusion under that label are even tougher than for other well known standards, including bluesign. In our latest collection, 83% of the products are Green Shape; the clothes meet those strict requirements. There are many aspects, but it's all about making people and the planet priorities, too, not just profit. This means, among other examples, that the products are produced fairly and our headquarters in Tettnang in southern Germany are climate-neutral.

It's not that this wasn't there before, when my father started the company. I'm proud of lots of things Vaude did then. For example, we were the first ever bluesign partner in 2001. The difference is that it's strategic now; it's built into everything we do.

In what ways is the outdoor industry different now?

Ten or 15 years ago, the industry was product-driven and the biggest change is that now it's brand-driven. Outdoor then was much less 'lifestyle' than it is now. It's a very competitive market now. Fifteen years ago it was niche. Now it's a really tough battlefield, all across the world and with so many brands competing. It's also the case that consumers are more demanding now. Worldwide market research shows that people want to consume, but with a good conscience.

Among the many awards that Vaude has won for its commitment to sustainability, which ones stand out, and why?

Two stand out. In 2015 we were named as Germany's most sustainable brand at the German Sustainability Awards, an initiative that involves federal and municipal governments, business associations, research bodies and civic society. That was a good night. So much hard work had gone into getting us to that point and we were very happy to get recognition for what we had done. And in 2017 we won the European business award for sustainability. So many companies from so many different sectors from all across Europe applied for it. That was another very happy night; we were dancing till dawn.

A consultant we work with said in 2016 that he had calculated that there were, at that time, 437 different eco-labels around the world (not all relating to textiles and clothing of course). Then he said that having 437 is the same as having zero. Do you have any sympathy with his opinion? What is the best way to make eco-labels meaningful, particularly for the consumer?

There are two sides to this. On the one hand I have total sympathy with this point of view. As I mentioned, people want to buy with a good conscience, but they can't because of all this confusion. For them to be able to buy with a good conscience, they are going to have to know which labels are the good ones.

But the other side of this is that there are good ones. There are labels that can give consumers all the reassurance they need. What's more, these good labels can also give a lot of structure to brands. Labels are important in helping brands have something to work towards, helping them build an eco-strategy.

The complexity is real. That's why we launched our own label. Green Shape considers wool, down, bluesign and so on. It has about 50 different aspects condensed into one label. I would say Green Shape shows that we can offer consumers good labels. And it's

Vaude chief executive, Antje von Dewitz, says that what drives her is the desire to help the clothing industry move in a new direction on climate change and economics.

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Vaude is committed to making people and the planet priorities, too, not just money.

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not just our label. We also support the Higg Index. When it comes out for the consumer it will offer good levels of clarity on everything from the planting of the cotton to the energy used to make the garment. Eight years' work have gone into the Higg Index already and there are ten years still to go.

What have been the biggest challenges in increasing the number of products that Vaude makes in Germany?

We are manufacturing 5% of our products in Germany at the moment. Cost is a challenge, particularly labour costs; that's a big problem and it's difficult for us to find sewing and factory workers. We are in a region that's beautiful, a place where there is practically no unemployment. It's also that the entire textile chain moved to Asia: machine suppliers, fabric suppliers… the entire supply chain is in Asia and that makes it difficult to manufacture product in Germany.

You spoke recently about "the disastrous effects on marine life" of so much plastic pollution in the oceans of the world. It's impossible to envisage a Vaude without plastic, a world without plastic. It's difficult to see how even excellent initiatives such as Biopile, a new fleece fabric (the result of a partnership between Vaude and Italian fabric supplier Pontetorto) that releases no micro plastic, can make a big difference. The volume of plastic we consume and throw away seems too great. What is the source of your optimism with regard to the problem of ocean plastic?

This is what motivates me and drives me. We're going in the wrong direction, in terms of climate change and our whole economic system. We can either lie on the floor and give in to despair, or go out and try to change things. In the years to come, our children will ask us what we did to make a difference.

I want to show that there are possible solutions and that it is possible to run a successful business while being fair. When we present on this subject we can see people growing in courage.

What will need to happen in the world for our children to inherit an economic system, a way of making and consuming products that is more in keeping with the Economy of the Common Good (a social movement seeking to build a fairer economic model) than the one we have now?

The system now judges companies on their financial figures. For many products there are hidden costs that the consumer will never see and there is exploitation going on, not only of nature but also of mankind. Instead of just financial performance the focus should be on ecological and social performance too. The Economy of the Common Good looks at everything and gives us a much broader balance sheet. The system should make sure there are no hidden costs. The economy has a purpose and it's to serve the common good.

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