

brand eins Online

Develop

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Come play!

Brand eins: a playful magazine

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THE STORY OF BRAND EINS MAY BE A WAY TO WATCH THE WORKINGS OF THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY, WHILE IT IS HAPPENING. IT IS THE MOST SUCCESSFUL GERMAN-LANGUAGE ECONOMIC MAGAZINE IN TERMS OF NEWSSTANDSALES. EACH ISSUE IS A NEW FEAST OF UNCONVENTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND THOUGHTFUL INSIGHTS INTO ECONOMIC ACTIVITY. IT BREATHES PLAYFULNESS. HOW DO YOU MAKE SUCH A PRODUCT, EVERY MONTH ANEW, IN A WORLD FULL OF HARD DEADLINES, CUT-THROAT COMPETITION FOR ADVERTISEMENTS, AND SHRINKING MARGINS? - BY STAYING YOURSELF, AND BY HAVING FUN.

DOOR ARNE GILLERT

There is no shortage of people writing about the importance of innovation in the knowledge economy. Yet it ever so often seems as if we were still living in a world in which companies that really are not very innovative (and certainly little fun to work for) can still be successful, and even beat their more innovative competitors in terms of admittedly mundane criteria as profits, revenues and what have you. Is the knowledge economy real?

At the same time, it is no art to see a new development when it has already happened.

NEW

‘When we started in 1999, we just wanted to make the magazine that we would like to read ourselves’, says Gabriele Fischer, editor-in-chief of brand eins. What sounds like a simple idea was, in fact, rather new for how magazines of the sort were made in Germany. Most economic magazines conceive of themselves as serious publications, where numbers are at the center of interest. We are talking about the economy, after all. ‘Human interest’ stories are okay, but only if they do not hurt the seriousness of the publication. The ‘economy’ is what happens in the boardrooms of big multinationals. And interviews or portraits of prominent figures is what sells at the newsstands.

Last but not least: the most important audience for the magazines are those companies who place advertisements in the paper.

These are the rules of the game. Unless, of course, you make other rules. Which is what brand eins does. Not numbers at the center of interest, but economically active people, entrepreneurs. Not seriousness of the story as the main criterion, but playfulness, the new

perspective, the surprise. Economic activity happens everywhere. The cleaning man at Siemens might be more interesting to

portrait than the CEO of the same company. Not the outside position from which, with superiority, you can know better what others should do, but the interested explorer who is curious to find new things, also the positive.

NO PLANNED PROCESS

It sounds like the recipe for ‘how to make a successful magazine’: simply analyse the rules and make different ones. For brand eins it has not been such a planned process: breaking the conventional rules is not an aim in itself; it is about passion, about making the space to create the magazine you are dreaming of. And the principles on which brand eins is based are not arbitrary, either; they fit together to form a different perspective of what the economy is about, what journalism about the economy is about. ‘We were fascinated to write about the new economy that was developing in front of our eyes. It started with all those software companies, but we were soon realizing that it was more than that. And that this new kind of economy needed explanation, sense-making’, tells Fischer.

Jens Bergmann, colleague in the editorial team adds: ‘For us, insolvency (the inability to pay, red.) is often the beginning of the story. For others, it is the end. After all, it is our own story.’ And everyone in the room – next to Bergmann and Fischer also Peter Bier, another editor – laughs. For its first four to five years, brand eins had always been on the edge of insolvency.

‘For years, every issue we made was potentially the last issue. And we always wanted to end with the best issue ever. We can tell you: insolvency, or the threat of insolvency is when things get interesting. It is the beginning, not the end’, explains Fischer.

This is the thinking, the new perspective. It describes how the product brand eins is different.

MECHANISMS

But what are the mechanisms according to which that very product is made? How do you organise to play? ‘Somebody without humour does not last here for long’, explains Bier: ‘We have no problem in dealing with chaos. What connects us is a basic attitude of positive curiosity. But our main principle is that we are making the issue together.’ There are five editors on a permanent-contract basis. All

other authors are contributing on a free-lance basis, with different degrees of closeness to the editors, like skins of an onion. Every issue has a leading topic, like ‘progress’, ‘design’, or ‘time’. The editorial team in Hamburg, where brand eins is based, gets together in a conference and decides on the main topic of the issues. That topic is subject to development and refinement as the issue is coming closer – maybe one of the free authors has a great idea that moves the topic in a different direction. Or, at a closer sight, a different approach

delivers more interesting articles. All editors are reading all articles, with one editor in the lead for each contribution. Everyone can make changes. And everyone can decide to trash a story if he finds it boring. ‘We also have our operational manager who is incredibly flexible.

Luckily he has never worked in a magazine before. He simply does not expect us to adhere to a plan that he has made sitting in his office’, adds Fischer.

AUTHORS

‘However, most importantly, we are successful because of our authors. It is a lot of work to develop and maintain a network of talented authors’, emphasizes Bergmann. Authors are invited to work only on those topics that they have fun working on. They are paid well, and they are visibly acknowledged for their contribution in the magazine. ‘Each month, there are two authors that are having a crisis. For us, it is

about building a long-term relationship, keeping together also when someone is going through some stress. It is about openness

and affection for the other. That relationship allows us to be sharp and without compromises when it comes to the quality of the articles. We don’t have rules about how to write or the ‘brand eins’ perspective. The connection between the different articles is a product of us communicating with each other, bringing ideas together’, says Fischer. Peter Laudenschlager, one of the freelance authors writing for

brand eins, confirms: ‘I really like to work for brand eins, and I know only few editorial teams in which the colleagues are so fair, open to new ideas and relatively free of competitive neurotics. A declined idea or change in a text are no personal offences, but attempts to make an even better issue. Because everybody keeps these norms of dealing with each other fairly, the work on the texts is mainly that: work on the text. And not a game about power. And I know what I am talking about: lots of other media that I have worked for are blocking their own work, and blocking the fun one could have working, by, for example, sadistic hierarchy-games, opportunism or personal sensitivities. And that comes typically with the logical consequence of cynicism. Knowing brand eins, I today wonder why I stayed with these other contexts for so

long.’ ‘Brand eins certainly is most fun to work for. It is a question of mutual trust. Take the way they deal with your expenses, for example. At any other paper you need to justify all you do, and there is a person at the other hand checking and double-checking if you did not spend a couple of Euros too much.

At brand eins, they simply decided not to control individual expenses. And it works: I feel trusted, and I would never betray them. And when they look at their overall spending on expenses, they have been stable over the years, so the trust pays back.’

Thekla Ehling, a freelance photographer for brand eins: ‘The thing I enjoy most is that the number one instruction they give you is “play to your strengths”. The instructions for a shooting are open. The photo-editor expects me to make something out of it, using my particular way of photographing. Of course they then give feedback, but it’s the kind of feedback where you are looking together to make it even better, not the feedback that you need to get back into the box.’

PLAYING

What they all say, in their own words: At the end of the day, it comes down to playing. The kind of playing that means ‘having fun’, not gambling, which is about ‘let us close our eyes and see what will happen’. Brand eins as a project was impossible from its very start. It took bringing in Mrs Fischer’s apartment as a security to finance the printing of the following issue. It happened under incredible pressure. ‘It worked because we took it lightly, we said “let’s just try it out”,’ says Fischer. ‘And’, adds Bergmann: ‘we simply felt that we could

never forgive ourselves if we had missed this ride.' Brand eins is about playing, it is about setting new rules. But to see the brand eins story as an example of the maverick that just breaks the rules of the establishment would mean missing the essence of what is at work. To me, the essence lies not in breaking the rules, but in bringing in your own, those that fit to your very personal perspective and passion, to your

way of having fun. Making those own rules is powerful when it happens in connection with others, not as your hermit self. The essence is having the courage to play along own rules, with no certainty whether others would like what comes out of it.

You play best by making your own rules, and finding others to play with. Success seems to be a logical consequence.

With thanks to Gabriele Fischer, Jens Bergmann, Peter Bier, Peter Laudenbach and Thekla Ehling for their generous willingness and

openness to tell their story, and to have a look at it from the perspective of how being innovative and playful works at brand eins.

www.brandeins.de