

Zeitschrift: Textiles suisses [Édition multilingue]
Herausgeber: Textilverband Schweiz
Band: - (1983)
Heft: 53

Artikel: Meeting swiss fabric friends
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-795668>

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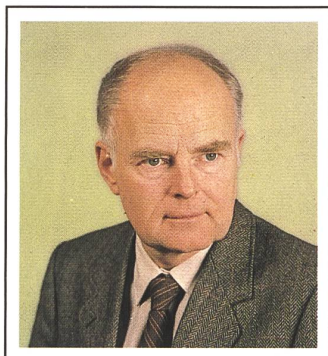
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Dieter Buchmann

Elégance

A brilliant idea marks the beginning of one of the world's unique textile enterprises. The ones who conceived it were two brothers, struggling to re-establish their family's drapery trade in postwar Germany. Why, they asked themselves, should we supply our customers with fabrics only. Why not provide suitable styling suggestions as well? Thus a concept was born which, in the course of 30 years, was to transform the modest trading business of the brothers Offergelt in Aachen into a leading and internationally renowned mail-order house for high-class fabrics and ready-to-wear. Elégance Rolf Offergelt GmbH today employs 230 employees and achieves an annual turnover of about DM 80 million through a world-wide network of 45 branch offices and representatives.

Luxury fabrics for dressmakers

"Quality and service has been our motto since the early days", says Elégance marketing manager and co-owner Dieter Buchmann. "We not only relieved our dressmaking customers of the risk of holding stocks, we also show them how to work up our fabrics into elegant garments. The basis of the traditional Elégance look is luxurious fabrics. 90% of our fabric requirements are bought at top houses in France, Italy and Switzerland; among them silk prints from Abraham, Gut and Riba, fine cottons from Mettler and Wetter and St. Gall embroideries from Forster Willi and Schlaepfer. All our fabrics are exclusive to us and selected according to a predetermined plan – colour-wise and themewise. From these fabrics leading couturiers create models that fit our overall fashion concept as defined by editor-in-chief Evelyn Geicke-Mathews and her team of designers and stylists. Top fashion photographers then photograph the models in life-style environments and in a photographic quality which clearly depicts styling details."

Twice a year, texts have to be edited in German, French, English and Spanish, 10 000's of shots taken, at least 200 colour photos processed and up to 12 million fabric swatches mounted by hand before the 18 000 catalogues can be mailed to professional dressmakers all over the world. A monumental task: Deliveries are effected from stocks centralized on 4000 m² storing facilities in Aachen, 1500 to 2000 shipments daily. A fully computerized order and stock processing system ensures delivery times within 10 days, even to remote customers overseas.

A managerial master-stroke

of the brothers Offergelt is undoubtedly their expansion into fashion publishing. Back in the early Sixties they launched a fashion magazine using the already existing photographic material from the fabric catalogue. Profit centers had not yet been invented, yet this is exactly what the far-sighted brothers established. In practically one single effort Offergelt obtained a costsharing instrument, an advertising media for their fabrics and an imageforming tool for their brand name. Today, *Elégance Paris* has a circulation of 200 000 copies and is sold worldwide to consumers through newspaper vendors. Upon its release, the magazine almost immediately started to create demand for Elégance fabrics in countries which hitherto



Pure cotton voile with jacquard clipcords from Wetter + Co. Ltd., Herisau



Embroidered polyester crêpe from Jakob Schlaepfer + Co. Ltd., St. Gall

had remained unserved and enabled the firm to expand its exports. In 1982, 70% of the approximately 700 000 meter annual fabric volume was exported. Major export markets are Central Europe, Spain, England and Greece, followed by Japan, which contributes 15%, and North America, which contributes 5% to the firm's total annual turnover.

MEETING SWISS FABRIC FRIENDS





MEETING SWISS FABRIC FRIENDS



Colour woven pure cotton from Wetter + Co. Ltd., Herisau

Elegant ready-to-wear for active women

Although the highly proficient dressmaking ateliers, which constitute the majority of *Elégance*'s fabric customers, are not as much affected by the dwindling interest in dressmaking, the diversification into ready-to-wear effected in 1969 proved a wise decision. One year earlier the firm had changed hands. Adopting the success formula of the founders, the new owners promoted their ready-to-wear line by means of catalogues available through direct-mail and at newspaper-stands. *Elégance Boutique* now has a circulation of 400 000 copies and proposes each season 120 fully

accessorized models to a clearly defined consumer segment: the active woman past thirty of above-average education and with an independent approach to fashion. The range offers its customers – among them 15% of all female doctors in Germany – elegantly-casual lifestyle fashions in high-quality fabrics and finish.

The ready-to-wear line is run as a completely separate operation from the piecegoods line. In close co-operation with mills and makers-up, the *Elégance Boutique* team headed by chief-stylist Ingrid Helm succeeds in creating homogeneous collections with emphasis on coordinate-looks. The garments are then manufactured by specialized contractors: knitwear in Italy and Germany, large pieces in Switzerland which – according to Dieter Buchmann – “offers the best quality of production and the most reliable deliveries.” *Elégance Boutique* and *Elégance Sport*, which was introduced in 1977 as a more casual range including active sportswear, now account for about two-thirds of the firm's total annual turnover.

Mail-order: Business with prospects

Talking about future prospects Dieter Buchmann believes that mailorder counts among the more promising forms of retail selling, even for high-class ready-to-wear. “New communication systems and the increasing barrenness of our cities work in our favour. Furthermore, we can react fairly fast to market fluctuations. In times of recession we simply reduce our circulation, thereby saving considerably on costs. As to products, our strong point lies in coordinations of different luxurious materials in matching colourways. These perfectly coordinated looks are the result of a substantial creative effort, of intensive work with fabric suppliers and couturiers, of a perfectionism which so far has been inimitable. In Germany we have reached a high rate of market penetration. Our short-range planning for existing product lines, therefore, aims at other receptive markets: Belgium, Holland, France and eventually the United States and Canada.”

Mail-order pro Dieter Buchmann, who previously gathered experience at the mail-order departments of Galerie Lafayette and Singer, closely watches developments in communication technology. In his opinion, international communication systems such as the expected European satellite television programme are interesting advertising media to build-up a brand name, a firm's image or to communicate an overall impression of a product line. On the other hand, he believes that the use of video as a sales instrument is a long way off yet. “None of the currently available video techniques can compete with the photographic quality

of the Elégance catalogues. Our photos show much more details than a television screen. So far, we do not see a profitable way to put our collections at the disposal of individual customers by means of video recording."

Licensed creativity for East Asia

The latest addition to Elégance's product lines and a further significant diversification is the licensing of designs and creative know-how to manufacturers located outside Europe. Japan already produces shoe and umbrella collections, bath-room sets and mix-and-match home furnishing ranges which carry the prestigious Elégance name. Apart from the name, house designers and contracted designers supply sketches, samples of material, patterns and colour concepts, in some instances even prototypes. Elements which cannot be profitably produced locally are manufactured in Europe and exported to Japan. This is a long-range project, which, however, already contributes to the firm's income and offers promising prospects. According to marketing specialist Dieter Buchmann, there is a great longing for European forms in Japan. Since Elégance already successfully dresses the Japanese woman, he feels confident that his firm will also succeed in helping her furnish her home.

B. Feisst

Colour woven cotton mousseline with viscose effect from Mettler + Co. Ltd., St. Gall

Elegantly presented – mail-order catalogues and fashion magazine published by Elégance, Aix-la-Chapelle



MEETING SWISS FABRIC FRIENDS

