

Interview with Kristian Lenz and Thilo Haas, founders and Managing Directors of Connox, August 2016

Thilo, Kristian, 10 years of Connox, growth in double digits every year, new employees every year, a selection of over 17,000 products, thousands of customers, orders from all over the world – how do you explain this success?

Kristian Lenz: With three factors: excited customers, a motivated team and passion for our products.

Even in the growth phase it's easy for the customer to fall into the background, so many other things seem more important. The common feeling that customers add to the workload is exactly what we want to prevent here at Connox. We try to see everything we do from the perspective of the customer and use that as a test. In this way, we create customer-orientated, and thus good, solutions.

The challenge is to bring the team along with us and make sure that they are as excited and motivated as we are. Every single person has to be aware that the customer is the focus of everyday work, and that the customers only see a 100% solution as a good one. This aim – to motivate each other and see the big picture – has been working well so far.

The third important factor is our products: design pieces and functional products of high quality. The curation of our products is a really important work process for us. In the end, of course, the customer makes their own personal choice. The selection that they find with us, though, is not made up of any old products, instead we aspire to offer the world's best designs – helpfully organised for all areas of home and living. We believe in individual living styles and self-determined decoration.

From IT to Marketing, you do almost everything in-house and only outsource a few areas. Is that also a secret of your success?

Kristian Lenz: As a so-called Pure-Player in ecommerce it is, in our opinion, a Must to unify the in-house competences. Only with an interdisciplinary team can you find a whole solution. That's the only way to offer customers the best service and the best shopping experience.

How did it originally come to the founding of Connox? How did it all begin?

Thilo Haas: The spring-board was our 10 year school reunion, when we met up for the first time in a long time. We quickly noticed that our skills and knowledge complemented each other well. Up until then, I had been self-employed as Programmer and IT Contractor in Haas Media GmbH, but I had already been thinking about a change of direction. Kristian already had several years' experience in online trade. He brought a huge amount of experience, contacts and knowledge about the market segment. So we decided to build a successful – but also human – company together.

And why "Connox"? Where does the name come from?

Finding a name was a structured procedure. First we wrote a list of various fantasy names that we could imagine being our brand. Then we compared them all with a search engine. It was important to us to find a rare or completely unused name. After a long search, the term "Connox" stuck. The only real use of it until then was in a volume of the science fiction series by Perry Rhodan with the title „Confrontation on Connox". We could accept that. [Laughs.]

What is special about your product selection?

Kristian Lenz: The high value of every single product, a high functionality and the design background – it's these features that define our curated product range.

Furniture is not exactly something that would primarily be bought online. In the end the feel and opportunity to sit down and try it out is important. What is the difference at Connox?

Kristian Lenz: It's a valid question. The truth is, times are changing: a few years ago people thought you couldn't buy shoes online, but present day is a different story. Ecommerce is an extension of trade, not an immediate replacement for it. Although there's TV there's still radio, and although there's YouTube there's still TV.

The feel of a piece is only one of many buying factors. With our online shop we can uncover a lot of other points for the purchase decision – including aspects where bricks and mortar business are at a thorough disadvantage. We place a high emphasis on visual components and bring our customers closer to the products with numerous images, 360° views and videos. The customer has the opportunity to take others' experiences into account with our many customer reviews. In addition, being online means we are in a position to present and deliver many different colour and material variations of a product – and there is an unbelievable amount of customisable configurations, when I think of our brands..

Connox looks back on a steep development curve. Were there also hurdles? Challenges that had to be mastered?

Thilo Haas: One of the annual challenges is definitely the Christmas period. In this time we have to deal with a multiple of the usual number of orders. We start preparing for this time in September by filling the warehouse. By December at the latest the seasonal business demands a high level of flexibility – from all departments. Customer Service works over the weekend, the number of parcels the warehouse sends on their way is in four figures and all other departments pitch in to help in the warehouse. We get involved, too. It's a great opportunity to scrutinise working processes and bring new optimisation ideas into the new year.

On top of that, we stand as an online shop under constant surveillance, we present ourselves through our method on a silver platter, so to say. There are many people who critically follow every law change and are just waiting for mistakes. Warnings have taught us to be pedantic when it comes to statutory requirements.

And finally, in the qualitative high value segment we have to deal with fraudsters. Of course we check whether sellers are trustworthy, but there are incidents from time to time.

You have worked with your own shop software from the very beginning. Why did you decide to develop and use your own software?

Kristian Lenz: The shop systems that were on the market in 2005 didn't meet our expectations. With our own solution we had the opportunity right from the beginning to optimise our shop for search engines, which wasn't yet possible with other shop systems at the time. Because of that we were one of the first shops with speaking URLs.

Privacy and security are a hot topic in online trade at the moment. At Connox too?

Kristian Lenz: Customer data has always been sacred to us. From the very beginning we have been vigilant that customer data is handled with the utmost responsibility. That is the only way that trust can be built. Having our own shop software allows us to immediately implement new requirements when it comes to privacy.

The sale of customer data – and we've had more than one offer relating to this – is absolutely off-limits for us. We also take the wish of the customer not to receive adverts very seriously.

Internationalisation is a hot topic at Connox at the moment. What are you planning? And what are your expectations?

Kristian Lenz: Yes, internationalisation is a big thing for us at the moment. Thanks to Connox.com we have already been taking orders from all over the world since 2010, but we are now looking to expand our international business with individual country domains and cater more strongly to the individual countries. In 2015 we launched Connox.at, it was followed in early 2016 by Connox.fr and this year we are planning four more European countries. We are hoping to contribute to the removal of Europe's borders!

Your competitors are not sleeping either. How will you assert yourself against them in future?

Kristian Lenz: Our strategy is to learn to go our own way, but also to adapt the really good things. We don't think it's important to be able to do everything, but rather to have a team that is prepared to set themselves and take on new challenges. This is how we want to grow.

What do you wish for Connox for the future?

Kristian Lenz: To leave our own traces in a world of copies.

Thilo Haas, Kristian Lenz, thank you for your time.

We would be happy to facilitate a personal interview for you with Thilo Haas and Kristian Lenz!

Find print-quality photos of the Managing Directors here:
https://www.connox.de/presse/Portraits_Connox-Geschäftsführer.zip

About Connox (www.connox.co.uk)

Connox is one of Europe's leading online shops for interior design. The company, based in Germany, has websites across Europe with thousands of selected premium products, including a broad range of award-winning designer products, design classics and other beautiful items for the home. The customer comes first for the Connox team and is central to every working decision. Connox customers benefit from high quality service, a readily available customer care team and a modern shop dedicated to the user experience. The specially developed shop software "EC Suite" enables a high technological flexibility and guarantees the latest security standards.

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