

Case Study on:



Ruban D'Honneur Recipient

European Business Awards 2012/13

Employer of the Year Award
bio verlag gmbh



bio verlag *A Healthy Working Environment*

Words from the Judges

“Working in harmony with employees and the environment.”



bio verlag is a publisher of customer magazines and a trade magazine for organic food shops. The company is a well-deserved recipient of the European Business Awards Ruban d'Honneur for Employer of the Year. The accolade has been given in recognition of the fact that the company is now owned by a foundation controlled by all the employees and is run ethically and ecologically, perfectly reflecting its business ethos.

For more than 30 years, bio verlag and its magazines have played an important role in the organic food movement across Germany. The company has developed a reputation for reliability and competence and works in partnership with the many different operators within the organic food industry. Both retailers and consumers look to the publisher to provide news and advice on industry trends and movements.

The company began with five founding members who held shares in the business, made decisions together and took a share of the profits. As the business grew, the company took on new employees, but was always looking for ways to involve everyone in the decision-making and also in the profit share.

From 1999 to 2011, the senior management of bio verlag offered all employees an opportunity to buy a share of the company and offered financial support where required. Over this period, 40 % of the staff took advantage of this offer and together held a minority. In 2011, the founders of bio verlag decided to hand over the company completely to the employees and therefore to waive the full market price of their shares. All employees decided to take this offer and raised their own capital to invest in shares.

“We wanted to see the business run by the employees. The very nature of our business means that we care about how people live and work and we wanted to make this a reality at bio verlag.” Sabine Kauffmann, CEO, bio verlag

bio verlag is now run by a foundation, which is controlled by staff as trustees. The foundation has the ultimate say in the direction and strategy of the company, but in terms of day to day decision-making, there is a senior management team in place to ensure the smooth running of the business.

“Since taking control of the business,



the employees have implemented very few changes. This is due, in part, to the fact that over the years, the employees have already been involved in decision making and are comfortable with how the business has evolved.”

One area that has seen large growth over recent years and is fully supported by all employees is flexible working and flexible total working time. Employees can select their days and hours of work and are able to quickly and easily change their working schedule should the need arise.

Out of the 50 staff currently employed by bio verlag, 43 work part-time.

All part-time workers are encouraged to advance their careers in the same way that full-time workers would be. The company is careful to ensure that everyone gets the opportunities they deserve in terms of career progression; even new mothers have been known to be promoted into management positions while on maternity leave.

“We try to run bio verlag by the same rules that we live our lives. We realise that work has to fit with everyday life, especially where children and families are concerned. With a bit of extra organisation and the commitment of a loyal staff, we are able to run an efficient business on our own terms.”

Despite offering part-time work and home office days, bio verlag believes that all employees need to be in the office for at least some of the week. This is particularly pertinent when there is a corporate decision to be made by the employees. By being in the office, everyone receives the same information and has a better understanding of a particular situation. The company also feels that by being on-site there is a definite sense of belonging and togetherness between the team. There is a monthly meeting that all employees are encouraged to attend.

The business itself runs as a sustainable operation and again this is something that is fully supported by all staff. The company uses solar power, a geothermal heat pump system and rainwater as service water. All bio verlag magazines are printed on 100 per cent recycled paper and bio verlag is the only publisher in Germany to be certified as carbon neutral with all its magazines.

“The judges felt that the organisation was completely in tune with the benefits of natural food production and in promoting its positive benefits throughout the whole supply chain.”

Phil Forrest, Chairman of Judges, European Business Awards 2012/13



Looking to the future...

The overall aim of bio verlag is to encourage more customers to buy ecological food and live as sustainably as possible. Through its publishing, the company not only provides useful advice for consumers, it also aims to help owners of organic food shops to successfully grow their businesses. bio verlag also looks to assist small organic producers in reaching a wider audience.

Reinforcing the wide reach of the magazines, the company has invested in an online presence through its website platform www.naturkost.de which is a portal for anyone interested in organic food and a healthy, sustainable lifestyle. The site offers information on cooking, health, wholefoods and plenty more. It is Germany's leading online platform with over 230,000 visitors per month. An application for mobile phones has been launched and offers a search tool for consumers to find their nearest organic shop.

“Schrot&Korn has accompanied its readers on their organic food journey. Now, with a circulation of over 800,000, these readers demand even more ideas for a good

life. We are using many different mediums to meet and exchange ideas and information with them.”

The media world is changing with advances in technology and the increased expectations of consumers. bio verlag is improving its service for readers and improving communication channels, especially two-way communication such as reader forums.

“This is an exciting time to be in the publishing world. Now, more than ever before, we are able to communicate directly with our readers, receiving instant feedback and a greater understanding of their wishes. Looking to the immediate future, we will continue building our online community where our readers can not only provide us with their news and views but can speak to like-minded individuals, sharing ideas and building friendships.”

bio verlag will continue to look at ways to operate more sustainably as a business, reducing wastage and cutting energy use wherever possible.





"The future lies in greater participation and to get there one needs to take the first step. We are very proud of our achievements at bio verlag and wanted a chance to show other businesses how employee ownership can work."



Sabine Kauffmann, CEO, bio verlag

About bio verlag

The late 1970s were a time of huge change; the global oil crisis was coming to an end but had left a bitter taste in its wake. People became more aware of the importance of protecting the environment and sourcing renewable energy – the green movement was born and bio verlag was born out of it – initially as pala verlag, then as bio verlag from 1999 onwards.

The first issue of consumer magazine Schrot&Korn was introduced to the public in September 1985 at the first ever BioFach Fair "Müsli 85". The magazine initially focussed on ecology, gardening, renovation and recycling before concentrating on the organic food movement. Today the magazine has a circulation of over 820,000 and an estimated readership of over 2.5 million, the highest in Germany for a magazine in this sector.

Following the success of Schrot&Korn, bio verlag launched the trade magazine BioHandel in 1986 and began operating as an industry advisor, running regular surveys from 1994 and launching its website in 1996. The company's third magazine, the natural cosmetics magazine Cosmia was launched in 2008.

About the European Business Awards

Since 2007, the European Business Awards has been shining a light on the most pioneering businesses on the continent by promoting excellence, best practice and innovation in the European business community. The awards programme recognises excellence in all disciplines of business including individual business functions. Entrants have ranged from fish farming organisations to renewable energy firms. In 2011, they had a combined turnover greater than €66 billion Euros (6% of EU GDP) and employed over three and a half million people between them.

Businesses from each of the 28 European territories are invited to enter the Awards. The competition for finalist places is fierce with many of the Europe's most established brands being represented.

The Judging panel is comprised of experts in their fields who each bring experience, business acumen and understanding to the board. The overall winners in each category will be announced at an awards ceremony in Istanbul in June 2013.

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