



Ulrike Vettermann

The Book is Old School, But Can Be Very Modern

Last November, [Buchbinderei Schaumann GmbH](#) of Darmstadt, Germany, won the gold medal in the „Finisher of the Year“ category at the [Druck & Medien Awards](#) in Berlin. In a guest blog, 55-year-old managing director Ulrike Vettermann describes what the award means for her family business, why she sees a rosy future for attractive books and how she got involved in the graphic arts industry.

November 10, 2022 was a special evening – for me, my husband, our company and our employees. Reiner and I waited anxiously at the Print & Media Awards Gala at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Berlin for the announcement of the award in the category „Finisher of the Year,“ while our employees 600 kilometers away were cheering along on their cell phones in a kind of „company viewing.“ Our joy was indescribable when presenter Laura Wontorra announced on the microphone that we had won the gold medal. We immediately sent a WhatsApp message to our company in Darmstadt, where there was also a loud cry of jubilation.

An important advertising medium

We were awarded for a book with an LED cardboard cover and built-in switch. We also submitted two other books for the Print Medien Award 2022. For one of them we received silver for the wow effect – but curiously we don't know for which one...

We may have won one or two Print Stars in previous years. But the Print & Media Award tops them all. Firstly, it is virtually the Oscars of the graphic arts industry in Germany. And second-

ly, it was explicitly about postpress. This is the reward for our many years of work. Because exclusively equipped and finished books – for example with linen and embossing – are our trademark. In this respect, this award is by no means merely symbolic for us; it is an important advertising medium and undoubtedly conducive to the acquisition of new customers. The industry has become even more aware of us and sees that we do something special.

A book is more than just fiction

In our meeting room, you'll find the house motto in big letters: „It's not just our heads that want to be fed – our eyes and hands demand to be stroked, too.“ An interesting, attractive book must be beautifully designed and printed on beautiful paper. It must be a pleasure to look at, smell, hold in your hands and relax. The book is old school, but can be very modern.

Added values are enormously important, especially for books, in order to win the battle for readers and stand out from electronic reading. We've already done the craziest things – in addition to the LED book, we've also made a book cover out of ceramic hob or fabric samples between printed pages. A book is more than just fiction, and we make sure that print remains attractive.

I only read e-mails and tagesschau.de electronically – everything else in print. And I never walk past a bookstore without going in. Of course, printed daily newspapers and school textbooks will have a hard time holding their own in the long run. But attractive books will remain. The feeling for them is even growing again.

Print finishing is still underestimated

The ideas for the special books we produce often come from agencies. We then sit down with them together at the table. This creative process takes time. However, time pressure – even for special products – has increased recently, and unfortunately we often get involved (too) late. Print finishing is still underestimated, although there are constantly new challenges. Yet printing and finishing are inseparable. That's why we regularly do in-house and online training for agencies. But it is difficult to get hold of these. Premium printers are not the problem – but others are much more resistant to advice.

After all, the book has to be (at least partially) machine-producible. I'm thinking of a handle book, for example. We made the hole for the handle with water jets, because punching (leaves fibers) or lasering (you see burn marks there) were not options.

You must never lose sight of the machine implementation – not least with a view to finances. That's why we need versatile equipment. The past 20 years have been a quantum leap in terms of mechanical engineering. Without appearing arrogant, we are proud to have provided some input for this. However, we do not (yet) have institutionalized contacts with the machine manufacturers, so there is still room for improvement.

A (pious) wish for the machine manufacturers

Just as we bring the agencies on board, we would welcome it if the machine manufacturers would intensify their contacts with us. As a traditional Kolbus house, we rely on a KM 610 perfect binder and a BF 527 bookline with Ribbon bookmark inserting machine from Muller Martini. We partly modify and tune the machines ourselves to suit our needs.

A lot has been done, especially in terms of usability, but more is needed – not least because of the shortage of skilled workers, which will probably be with us for a long time to come. Manufacturers could use even more artificial intelligence. For example, what if they each supplied 3D glasses that allow you to walk through the machine? We have employees from 16 nations

in our company. They can't all read a German or English instruction manual.

AI elements not only make operation easier, but also ensure that our industry is attractive to young people. It must be cool to work in a graphics company. Because the faster/higher/further of the past has been exhausted. Instead, automation and robots are the order of the day in our businesses today. Young professionals are attracted to this.

Fun is a must

Having the right people at the table for an exciting book project (we have trained bookbinders in our processing department who also know the limits of what is possible) is only one factor. Just as important is that you have to have fun. We therefore attach great importance to communication – not only with our customers, but also with our employees.

Our company, founded on April 1, 1963 (we are more or less an April Fool's joke) with four employees, celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2023 and currently employing 65 people in two shifts over five days, originally comes from the publishing business. For a long time, publishing products accounted for 90 percent of our sales volume. Over time, we broadened our range and shifted our focus to print shops. A typical product is annual reports: if companies are already having one printed (which they no longer have to do by law), then for image reasons they want a high-quality and also high-priced one that stands out from a mass product.

Our customers – apart from agencies, also printers, publishers, industrial customers and paper shops – come mainly from the three German-speaking countries Germany, Austria and Switzerland, but also from Benelux and Italy. The rest of the foreign market unfortunately slumped during the corona crisis for several reasons.

More important than pure production figures is the value added achieved

We produce around four million hardcovers and one million softcovers a year – with print runs of between 50 and 300,000, and between 5,000 and 20,000 in large quantities. However, the value added achieved is much more significant than the pure production figures. For example, high-quality notebooks with color sections have experienced a real renaissance in recent years.

The current year will probably bring us another lean period due to high electricity, gas and paper prices. But I see the hardcover market in particular in a positive light. Books are becoming more important again as a way of slowing down our lives. And innovative companies like ours will play an important role in this. When I see that ours is the only one left out of 15 bookbinderies in Darmstadt, I don't think we've done everything wrong.

Growing up with books

It is not only our company that is celebrating an anniversary in 2023, but also me personally. I have been running the family business for 25 years in the third generation. However, it was anything but clear that I would one day be at the helm of Buchbinderei Schaumann GmbH. My childhood dream was to be an opera singer. That didn't work out, but I still enjoy going to the opera with my husband. I was rather rebellious in my youth, and my father always gave me free rein. However, I always liked to help out in the company. That was fun, and I earned some pocket money. So I grew up with books...

...and on a different level I embarked on a career in which I had something to do with books. After finishing secondary school, I trained for two years as a retail bookseller, then worked for six years as a bookseller specializing in specialist books and foreign business, and took the Chamber of Industry and Commerce's aptitude test to become a commercial trainer.



Last November, Buchbinderei Schaumann GmbH won the gold medal in the „Finisher of the Year“ category at the Druck & Medien Awards in Berlin. From left: Hans Leuenberger (Regional Director Germany/Switzerland/Direct Markets Muller Martini), Laura Wontorra (presenter), Reiner Vettermann (Managing Director Buchbinderei Schaumann), Ulrike Vettermann (Managing Director Buchbinderei Schaumann), Jens Pfeifer (Sales Manager Buchbinderei Schaumann).

Judo as a balance

For three more years, I worked as a management assistant in a software house for office equipment, until my father unfortunately fell seriously ill. Although he would never have forced me to do so, he was of course pleased that I joined the family business as the only child. After his death in 1998, I took over the management of the business together with my husband Reiner, who has been working in the company for 42 years. The two of us complement each other perfectly: I am the commercial soul and responsible for all business matters, Reiner as a master bookbinder for production and sales. We do the human resources together.

The fact that we form the management of our company as a married couple is – frankly speaking – a blessing and a curse at the same time. The short decision-making paths are a great advantage. Our suppliers also benefit from this, by the way. Once we have decided on a machine, it is quickly put into operation. On the other hand, it's not always easy to distinguish between work and leisure, especially since the pressure has increased. Sports are an important component of our free time. We are both active judoka and coaches – my husband also for physically and mentally disabled people.

Always a flair for the digital

And the fact that I worked in a software company in the meantime still helps me today in understanding the analog and digital world. I've always had a flair for the digital and was the first person in the bookstore to place orders using a modem. In our company, I quickly introduced IT and maintained our servers myself for many years. I also took care of electronic shopping bags early on and drove digitization forward. Because this is important for our analog end products to be successful.

What I find particularly exciting about my job is shaping the future and turning bad into good. I'm thinking, for example, of the difficult times during the corona pandemic. What I particularly value is the human side – in other words, how we treat our staff. One of my management principles is to treat other people as I would like to be treated. Because as a boss, I'm not something better.

A lot also comes from our employees

Proximity to our staff is therefore a key feature of our corporate culture. For example, my husband walks through the company every day and greets employees with a handshake. And he regularly plays indoor soccer with them. It is therefore no coincidence that – as the response to our award has proven – we have a high level of identification and long company tenures. And this in turn has an impact on the high quality of the end products.

Of course, at the end of the (working) day, our performance must also be right. But the trust that our employees have in our typical family business is one of our great strengths. Reiner and I know the families of almost all our employees, their problems, worries and needs. A typical example was the closing party after the company's internal betting game for the soccer World Cup at the end of last year. Our staff organized a magician on their own initiative. We don't just dictate everything, a lot also comes from our employees.

„Dear Mrs. Vettermann, dear Sirs“

Unfortunately, there is still one downer in my professional environment: I find it regrettable that there are so few women in management positions in the graphic arts industry. However, this is a social problem and not primarily an industry-specific one. I was against quotas for a long time, but now I'm no longer so sure, because the general conditions for women are really difficult. As a woman, I was on my own for a long time.

Of course it's cool to be greeted at a conference with „Dear Ms. Vettermann, dear Sirs“. But I would find it even cooler if there were more women in management positions in our industry. Because everyone can do everything if they want to.

Yours,

Ulrike Vettermann,

Managing Director Buchbinderei Schaumann GmbH, Darmstadt