

From publishing house to tech company: Visable CEO Peter F. Schmid tells change story in new book

Hamburg, 4 March 2021 - Founded in 1932 as the publisher of the reference book "Wer liefert was" (Who supplies what), Visable has transformed itself in recent years from a publishing house into an agile international internet company. This has happened under the leadership of CEO Peter F. Schmid. In 2012, after a successful career at AutoScout24, eBay Classifieds, mobile.de and PARSHIP, the entrepreneur switched from the consumer to the B2B side to exploit the potential of the market and, as CEO and shareholder, to drive digitalisation at "Wer liefert was" in Hamburg. Schmid describes this far-reaching change process in his new book "Mission Wandel" ("Mission Change"). In it, he tells of successes, growing pains and the challenges that arise when start-up mentality meets Hanseatic reserve.

"What, they're still around?"

When writing "Mission Change", Peter F. Schmid was able to draw on a lot of experience from his long career as an internet entrepreneur in which he built up and managed digital marketplaces in a wide variety of industries. Just a few years ago, when the then CEO of the online dating agency PARSHIP received an offer to take over the almost 90-year-old publishing company, Schmid would never have dreamed that Visable could mature into a growing pan-European tech company. "My first question was: Oh, they're still around?" the current CEO recalls in the book. Under the umbrella brand Visable, the company has since successfully internationalised and is now a provider of the leading online B2B platforms in Europe with EUROPAGES and wlw (formerly "Wer liefert was").

Start-up mentality meets tie knot

But the road to a successful "re-startup" – i.e. a digitally transformed, thoroughly renewed organisation – was long, and the necessary cultural change took some getting used to for many. Where today the boss is on first-name terms and a casual hoodie is given to every new employee, Peter F. Schmid was confronted with a very different picture when he started work in 2012: "People were on last-name terms, wore obligatory suits, and only spoke in meetings when asked," the current CEO remembers. Influenced by the leadership style of US tech companies – Schmid himself worked as Vice President at eBay Classifieds, among others – he knew that things could be different: "Today, I try to take up impulses for change and innovation in conversations, and I do so across the hierarchy," he says in "Mission Change". "Peter" changed almost everything when he arrived, including the dress code and he introduced the first-name basis for everyone. A decision he justifies in the conviction that this reduces the distance between hierarchical levels.

Growing pains

These and more far-reaching changes were not only met with enthusiasm. Numerous resignations of staff who were not comfortable with the new culture followed. Even newly acquired expertise, which was necessary to shape Wer liefert Was into an internationally competitive tech company, was initially perceived as a threat. Schmid's insight from this time: "If you want to further develop existing teams and bring in a fresh dynamic, you need a critical mass of employees willing to change." Today, this critical mass has been reached. The company has grown continuously, not only in terms of personnel: in 2020, the "re-startup" recorded a record turnover of almost 60 million euros – despite Corona.

"B2B in Europe starts with us"

One of the reasons for this growth is also the successful internationalisation, which was a decisive step in realising Schmid's vision: "I wanted to build a European internet champion on whose platforms all SMEs in Europe could present themselves, and which would become the most important source of new, global customers for the SME industry in Europe." The mission statement: "B2B in Europe starts with us". Schmid shows in his book that apparently trivial aspects can become stumbling blocks: "Documents, presentations and the company meeting were switched to English. A supposedly simple step, but due to a lack of language skills it often led to information being lost on all sides and to misunderstandings. Today, VISIBLE succeeds in creating synergies between locations in Paris, Hamburg, Berlin and Münster without any language barrier. The staff speaks over 20 languages and the two proprietary platforms are visited by buyers from over 200 countries. Schmid describes the way there in "Mission Change".

Personal wealth of experience makes "Mission Change" special

A central motivation for Peter F. Schmid to write this book was to motivate other entrepreneurs to push ahead and consistently pursue important changes - despite all the challenges. "A number of companies have already managed the generational change. But many SMEs still have it ahead of them. My descriptions of change from a personal perspective are intended to encourage people to get through phases of apparent stagnation, static-inert periods of organisational reform as well as real setbacks - without losing the fun in the process," Schmid emphasises.

"Mission Change" is available from Springer Gabler Verlag.

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Über Visable

Visable unterstützt den industriellen Mittelstand, Produkte und Dienstleistungen für Einkäufer international zugänglich zu machen. Als speziell auf Geschäftskunden zugeschnittene Verbindung aus eigenen B2B-Plattformen und Online-Marketing-Services wie zum Beispiel Google Ads und Retargeting bietet das Unternehmen ein breit gefächertes digitales Portfolio zur Reichweiten-Steigerung im Internet.

Zu den von der Visable GmbH betriebenen Plattformen gehören wlw („Wer liefert was“), heute die führende B2B-Plattform in der D-A-CH-Region mit rund 620.000 registrierten Firmen, sowie die europäische B2B-Plattform EUROPAGES, auf der rund 3 Millionen Firmen registriert sind. Zusammen erreichen die Plattformen monatlich über 4 Millionen B2B-Einkäufer, die nach detaillierten Unternehmens- und Produktinformationen suchen.

Mit seinen Online-Marketing-Services bietet Visable Unternehmen zusätzliche Möglichkeiten, ihre Reichweite im Internet zu erhöhen. Visable ist derzeit einziger Google Premium-Partner mit B2B-Schwerpunkt.

Das Unternehmen Visable entstand als Antwort auf die Herausforderungen der Internationalisierung und Digitalisierung im B2B-Bereich und beschäftigt heute an seinen Standorten Hamburg, Berlin, Münster und Paris über 410 Mitarbeiter. Als gemeinsames Dach für die Marken wlw und EUROPAGES baut Visable seine Marktplätze und Online-Marketing-Services kontinuierlich aus.

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