

THIERRY LEWALLE

# Global Concept

## The magic of Christmas

**An enlightened entrepreneur, Thierry Lewalle is a self-made man through and through. This engineer, who nobody could have guessed would end up with a career in festive decoration, guides the fate of Global Concept with an expert hand... His "small business" has become one of the world's leading players in this niche.**



### ► Like Steve Jobs, legend has it that you started in your cellar...

It's true (laughs)! I'd just returned to Belgium after three years in China. I needed premises to start up in, so I rented the cellar of a company near where I lived. I even had access to their telephone network. That was very useful at the time, because there was always someone to take my calls.

### Sweden, Vietnam, China

#### ► Let's go back to China: how did you end up there?

I've always loved travelling. Even when I was at SBS-EM, I did my Erasmus course in Sweden, although the exchange programme had only just started up.

▲  
"Japan, Hong Kong, not forgetting the malls of the Middle East, are the place to be."

#### ► Ingest 1992

#### ► Founder and CEO of Global Concept

Once I'd got my diploma, I won – brace yourself! – the Prize of the Ministry of Foreign Trade, which offered the possibility of a work placement abroad. I went to Vietnam for four months, as an attaché at the Embassy. It was a great adventure! When I got back home, the Prince Albert Fund enabled me to go off to China for a year. It was an excellent springboard for a young graduate, because I benefited from support to undertake an international project.

#### ► Things went so well that you stayed there...

As you know, there are lots of bicycles in China... But there weren't any trouser clips. That's how I started my first business there. At the same time, I was receiving more and more requests from Belgians looking for Chinese products. This was in the 1990s, well before the arrival of online shopping. My role as a middleman went quite well.

# 365 days a year



## A brilliant idea

► Three years later, back in Belgium, you founded Global Concept, which specialises in seasonal decoration. An original niche...

One of my last business deals in China had been to find lights for an events agency to decorate the Sablon district in Brussels. So I looked into this area in detail. When I came back to Belgium for family reasons, I thought this would be a channel worth tapping into!

## ► More by instinct?

I never said to myself "I want to be an entrepreneur", even at the end of my studies. But I've always had an "entrepreneurial" approach: daring, without fretting too much. This mindset enabled me to seize opportunities benefiting, among other things, from the credibility of a diploma from SBS-EM. It's an asset when you have to convince a banker, for example.

## ► Now more than ever, entrepreneurship has the wind in its sails: is Belgium on the right track?

There's a lot of talk about it, but attitudes don't always follow suit. A risk-taking culture is lacking and some of our assets sometimes turn into weaknesses. Take a newly graduated engineer, for instance: in general, he will find a stable job, with a company car, meal vouchers and a salary that is more than adequate. This "comfort" can sap the desire to undertake projects. Particularly when it's mixed with the fear of failure. My motto has always been: "I never lose. Either I win, or I learn." Someone comes a cropper? I take my hat off to them. Being an entrepreneur means having the courage to see a fall as a learning experience.

## ► A philosophy that you have applied to Global Concept?

I have never really been afraid of failing... and one thing led to another! After my first contracts in Belgium, I realised that the national market was too limited. So I targeted the neighbouring countries. After two

years, the international machine was up and running, in particular thanks to the creation of a catalogue and a successful first participation at Christmasworld in Frankfurt. The feedback proved that we were on the right track.

## Do it yourself

### ► What does the company Global Concept represent today?

As a vital player in seasonal festive decoration, we aim to constantly create added value. That's why we design and make all our products ourselves. We're fortunate enough to be a small structure with all the assets of a big one, because we do everything, from creation to production and including the international aspect. Our customers are mainly shopping centres, a niche with enormous potential, as well as professionals such as decorators, events organisers, ice rinks, Christmas markets, etc.

### ► Christmas is at the heart of your range, but it's not just that...

There's Easter, Ramadan, the Chinese New Year, etc. There is no lack of outlets. For example, we have just set up two giant sequoias for two malls in the Netherlands, as well as some pink flamingoes for a Swedish customer.

### ► What difficulties does your sector face?

It's competitive, with a handful of big players. But we hold our own well. In 2018, Global Concept operated in almost 50 countries. As most of our turnover is recorded abroad, we have to deal with the ups and downs of the export sector. For instance, we've approached the South Korean →

## Inside Global Concept

### April 1996

After three years in China, Thierry Lewalle taps into the seasonal festive decoration channel. He founds his company and starts his assault on Christmas.

### In 1996

In the same year, the company decorates its first shopping centre in Belgium.

### In 1999

Its initial successes prompt Global Concept to set out to conquer neighbouring markets.

### Since 2002

Every year, the company takes part in the biggest fair in the global sector: Christmasworld in Frankfurt.

### In 2012

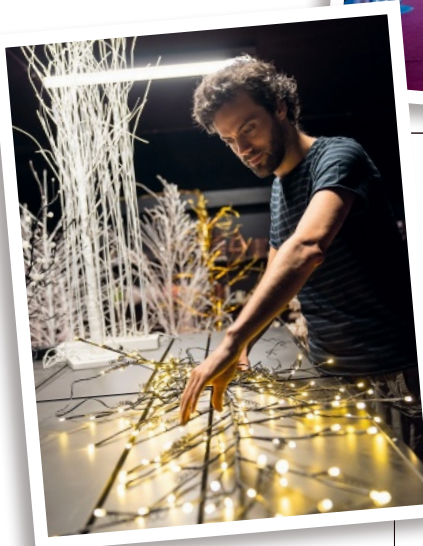
The business continues to grow, multiplying partnerships, innovations and new markets. A success that "forces" it to increase its workforce and expand its premises and its showroom.

### In 2015

International expansion follows, including the conquest of the American market.



“MY MOTTO HAS ALWAYS BEEN: "I NEVER LOSE. EITHER I WIN, OR I LEARN"”



market. It isn't easy, because of their insular, slightly nationalistic attitude. Asia in general is complicated. Sometimes there are major obstacles to entering a market. Like in Brazil, where we had to be inventive and go through a local partner.

**The driving force: innovation**

► On the subject of creativity, how do you continuously reinvent yourself?

Our creed is to make products that stand out from those of the competition... and that are constantly different! Either tailor-made, or created from scratch. That's why we hold a "crea" lab' every week. All the teams, myself included, sit down round a table to share ideas. An essential place for innovation... The outline designs are then discussed again and reworked until they are perfect. You might say that we reinvent Christmas every year, but without ever losing clarity. We can't confuse the public: they always have to be able to find their bearings. It's a balancing act between originality and tradition!

► Which projects are particularly special to you?

Difficult to say! This year we have won three huge contracts in Mexico. It was a great success, because we banked on originality: one of the proposals played with the idea of... Japan, while another focused on wool. It was cheeky, but it worked. We have also signed our first big deal in China, thanks to the efforts of our Hong Kong office. A crazy project, based on a disco Christmas, very eighties. Japan, Hong Kong, not forgetting the malls of the Middle East, are the place to be.



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If you'd like to suggest an alumnus or alumna or present your project in this section, write to us at [sbs-em@elixis.be](mailto:sbs-em@elixis.be).

► You're not planning to stop, with things going so well...

There's no lack of challenges. That's what stimulates us! Our first challenge is to make an even bigger mark on the international scene. To become indispensable and multiply our commercial means, country by country, even though we already have an excellent base. We are aware of our qualities and that gives us tremendous confidence to move up a gear. Practically speaking, the aim is to double our income. The other issue is new technologies! We are making increasing use of interactivity... The general public is in search of a customer experience. Which makes decoration a key element in our customers' marketing approach. It's exciting. There is still a long way to go, but it looks set to be fine and well lit! ■

**5 TIPS for budding entrepreneurs**

- 1/ **Don't be afraid and have confidence in yourself**  
"That applies to all entrepreneurs! Intentions are not enough. Sometimes you just have to go for it, without asking yourself too many questions. Believe in yourself and don't give up."
- 2/ **Be proud of your failures**  
"You never fail. You only learn. At Global Concept, we have launched quite a few products that didn't work... So what? We keep going!"
- 3/ **Multiply the experiences**  
"My time in China was crucial to my learning curve. Don't "settle down" too quickly in the "comfort" of a job..."
- 4/ **Share**  
"Especially with other entrepreneurs. It's enriching and enables you to find out how others run their ship."
- 5/ **Surround yourself with the right people**  
"When it comes to exports, for example, the AWEX (Walloon agency for exports and foreign investments) is a marvellous tool. Don't hesitate to ask for help and take part in events."