



nota bene

It's the morning after the night before – that previous night being the fantastic Viennese launch party of Bene's new PearsonLloyd designed PARCS range. We must confess that, initially, we're slightly concerned to find Bene supreme approaching with what appears to be a large glass of red wine – it is, after all, barely 10am. Then again, maybe this is customary in Vienna.

Of course, the vin rouge is in fact nothing more sinister than revitalising fruit juice and a fully alert and energetic Thomas is more than ready to sit down with us and talk about the new furniture and all things Bene. We have, over the past 10 years, been fortunate enough to enjoy Thomas' hospitality and company a few times in both Austria and London. It's always a pleasure for us to chat with this charismatic, funny and interesting guy.

Bene is most definitely an innovator in this market, constantly pushing the boundaries of workplace products. What's more, it is one of those rare leading office innovators without roots in the US, Germany, Italy or dear old Blighty. This is a brand that has developed, flourished and turned global from the relative backwater of Waidhofen, Austria.

Bene is convinced that there is a clear connection between the design of office and working environments, corporate culture and the success of a company. Furthermore, Bene's concepts, products



profile



services put this philosophy into reality. The company has some 82 sites in 33 countries and nearly 1,300 employees worldwide. In the business year 2008/09, consolidated sales of the Bene Group amounted to EUR 265.3 million, making it the clear market leader in Austria and one of the very largest in Europe.

We are of course keen to ask Thomas about the PARCS collection and the exciting Pearson Lloyd link, but we'd also like to hear how a leading innovator in the market is approaching business in these difficult times – of course, the introduction of a major new collection and the previous night's soiree give us something of a clue. 'It is very difficult of course right now,' Thomas admits. 'Austria, Germany, Switzerland are all suffering quite a lot. Eastern Europe is even worse I would say, although we have the impression that London, maybe, is getting a little better and the Middle East is going ok for us. As I said though, it is difficult almost everywhere.'

'We are prepared for this – this is nothing new to us. This happens every time the economy goes down – it is obvious that things happen in cycles and we could see where this was going, so it is no surprise to us.'

So how do you counteract this? In fact, do you counteract at all, or do you stick, not twist? We think we know what our answer will be. 'We have, of course, already looked at new areas of the office and developed new products to work here – but again that is something we were already looking at and is nothing new for us.'

'We have already looked to new geographies; we have started a dealership in Korea and we have also moved into India – we are now thinking about maybe going to New York as well. In other words, we have tried to put our feet on the ground in new markets for us.'

We have also heard that, as well as PARCS, there are further new product developments on the way – and in areas of the furniture landscape that Bene has not, traditionally, looked at. 'That's true,' Thomas reveals. 'There is a new chair we have developed called B_Run. It is a very simple but very good looking chair with a lot of options and colours available – it can be mesh back or upholstered. It is in a very good price range, so we are quite optimistic about this.'

'We have to think about our business right now. We can't be concerned by our competitors. We have to think about bringing the right margins in and about our own success.'

'We have clear advantages right now; we are a listed company and everyone can see how we are doing. We have a very strong financial basis and we are a very stable company right now.'

With our tongues slightly in cheeks, we ask whether Thomas finds it scarier to face a board of shareholders or having to face the family. 'That's a good question,' he chuckles. 'Neither is scary – Bene is financially strong enough to survive crisis and the family is a strong team. The advantage for us is that the main shareholders here are the family – we own approximately 43% of the company, so most of decisions are made within the company, within the board and within the family. It is a real partnership with the other board members – and my father and I.'

We ask Thomas if he'd tell us a little about his own background and career. 'I studied economics in Austria, and before that studied interior design and carpentry at college. Then I worked for a major construction company in Germany, before moving to the United States where I worked with Haworth. We have a very close relationship with Haworth – we have sold the Comforto chair here in Austria for a very long time – and we knew the people there. I had the chance to go over and do a kind of internship – to do some training, work in marketing etc. They do things quite differently – they are very precise and organised. I think we are more spontaneous, flexible and creative maybe.'





▶▶▶▶▶ In 1994 I moved back to Austria and joined the company, working on marketing and portfolio management. This is what I am still responsible for today – taking care of getting the right products into the portfolio as well as the Group’s communication, the marketing, the showroom design and the internet.

‘I have been with the company for 46 years really – I grew up with it and it has always been around me. I always liked what the company was doing – and I liked the idea of coming back here and helping develop Bene into a European player. It is good stuff, and we have a lot of good, nice people here. The match was perfect for me;

this is the family company and I had the chance to do what I like to think I am good at, where my talents lie.’

We move on to talk about the new collection. PARCS creates zones in an office that enhance the productivity and the well-being of a company’s employees by facilitating various ways of working such as meeting, presenting, learning, focusing or touchdown.

PARCS is a product line with architectural quality that consists of several elements, like a kit, that collectively enables and creates a multifunctional working environment. These elements, collectively, are designed to enhance communication and cooperation as well as

profile



contemplation and concentration, and, furthermore, anticipate future changes in working patterns, techniques and behaviour.

This is certainly a bold collection – and delivered at an extremely bold time. We ask Thomas why PearsonLloyd? ‘It was something of a coincidence,’ he concedes. ‘Luke and I were on judging panel for a design competition at 100% Design in London. Afterwards, we stood and had a drink and started talking about what we could do to create something for that ‘middle zone’ of the office.

‘Of course we knew PearsonLloyd and knew they had been producing a lot of really good things, so we decided to get together

and try something. Afterwards, we met a few times and found that this was a really good match.

‘We started really thinking about PARCS two years ago, so we didn’t know what the climate would be right now. We decided to bring it out now because we thought this was a really good time to get some attention – at a time when nobody else is doing anything similar. Nobody’s really doing anything right now, so this is a brilliant time to launch anything – and even better to launch something as good and innovative as I believe this range is.

Back at Orgatec 08 Bene revealed the fantastic Filo table, designed by EOOS – another leading Euro-design collective. And, dare we say, another pretty cool one at that. We ask whether this is a conscious decision by Thomas and Bene. ‘Yes, of course, and I think this is something that we will continue to look for in the future. These external designers have the experience and the expertise in special areas – and this has got to be important for Bene. Our internal designers know standard furniture quite well, but for those new areas and new products I think it is important to find new people.

‘This is a logical thing. Jeremy Myerson (who chaired the previous evening’s presentation) has helped us to be sure that we are doing the right thing here. He has supported us in the thinking behind and the development of these new ideas.’

We finish by talking about the brand (what else?) and suggest that, in these difficult financial times, a strong brand might just make all the difference. ‘This is something that we have tried to achieve here with Bene. Bringing people like PearsonLloyd and Jeremy Myerson to the company strengthens our brand. You connect Bene with knowledge, innovation and new ideas. It is important. Absolutely important.’ ●

