



profile



Some Candy Talking

Question for you: what do some of the leading chocolate and confectionary marketing and branding campaigns and NBA All-Star Alonzo Mourning have in common? The answer lies, strangely, in the Netherlands. And, to be more specific, it lies with the man behind much of what leading carpet manufacturer Desso is currently getting so right.

The wonderfully named Alexander Collot d'Escury is the Chief Commercial Officer for Desso. Despite Blackberry undergoing something of a meltdown in the UK and Desso being in the throes of organising an important event this very evening, Alexander is full of smiles and more than happy to give us an hour of his time.

Hailing originally from the Netherlands, Alexander joined Desso from Nestlé S.A. and has, we discover, many years of commercial and general management experience in a variety of countries. He started his career with Sara Lee, and went on to work for 13 years with Nestlé. We start, however, at the very inception of this fascinating career. 'I studied in Rotterdam – I am a lawyer by profession,' Alexander begins. 'I soon found out that I wasn't very suited to that kind of very detailed work. I then joined an American company – Sara Lee. I worked for them for three years in Barcelona – during the Olympics in 1992, which was fantastic. I was an International Management Trainee; when I was young I had a dream that I wanted to travel internationally, especially to Latin America, where my grandfather had worked in the past. Business was always in my mind

– my family has always been on the legal side of things and I tried, but shifted towards the business side.

'I then joined Nestlé in 1994, in the Netherlands. I was a brand manager for a number of leading confectionery brands including Kit Kat and Rolo. We had a fantastic commercial at the time, which went all around the globe for Rolo – the concept was; who would you give your last Rolo to? It was incredible.'

Alexander moved on to work in Central Eastern Europe, based in the Czech Republic, before moving to Switzerland, and then back to Eastern Europe and Hungary. 'Then we were supposed to finally get the chance to go to Latin America – to Mexico. My wife said 'Enough is enough – the kids are in secondary school, we are stable, no more moves!'

'I then was given the opportunity to join this management buy-in at Desso. This was 2007, based out of the Netherlands, with me taking commercial responsibilities. I'm happy to say that we have been doing business in Latin America for a year and a half now, so that is my dream fulfilled.'



profile

▶▶▶▶▶ We ask about the challenges that faced Alexander when moving from the world of confectionery to the carpet industry. 'I think what you do learn is that there is essentially not a lot of difference between two bars of chocolate – but once you put a wrapper around them...one is Cadbury's Dairy Milk, one is purple, say, and another is triangular with a picture of the Alps on the box – all of a sudden you have a real difference. Coffee is exactly the same; you have the beans, you grind them – but then you add George Clooney! You have that 'Starbucks Experience'. You have different worlds suddenly.

'Then you distribute your goods – in certain markets you have just five or six retailers, or customers, distributing 80% of your goods. So it is an excellent and very competitive business where you learn how to put the customer, the consumer, at the centre of the business and understand what the potential is and what the obvious needs and desires of your consumers are. You can then translate these desires into concepts, to personalise your products.

'You don't have five or six customers dealing with 80% of your product in the carpet business – you don't have this at all. In general, the carpet industry is some move away from these fast moving

markets. You have a very broad customer base and the product simply goes left or right, is purple or is dark green! There is so much that can be done in terms of the concept here – and that is what we've been trying to do over the past couple of years; start to put the customer, the consumer, the architect, the designer at the centre of the table. We've started to develop concepts and focus the company strategy around these concepts – by innovation focus on three pillars: creativity, functionality and finally our Cradle to Cradle philosophy.

We talk at length about the subject of sustainability and Desso's ongoing missions and goals – which, we are delighted to report, are exceeding even the manufacturer's high expectations. Alexander tells us that the company is now three years into a commitment to become 100% Cradle to Cradle® by 2020, and thanks to its highly ambitious programme of implementation, the last 12 months have seen major advancements in moving towards this target. These include the launch of the first carpet tile in the world to receive Cradle to Cradle Silver Certification for an entire carpet tile product, and the refinement and development of its separating and recycling techniques.



profile

▶▶▶▶▶ Meanwhile, heading back to the concept of ‘putting the customer at the centre of the table’, Desso has introduced a create-your-own AirMaster initiative. ‘In my former business I often used to work with leading chefs,’ Alexander muses. ‘You soon realise that they are artists, they are creatives and they want to put their own signature on things, to be unique and to be able to differentiate themselves from the rest. You need to be able to give them the tools to do this – and with design it is exactly the same.’

‘In early 2008 we asked our customers where we sat in the industry; we scored very highly on quality, reliability and service, but in terms of creativity we were maybe seen as a little boring and also, on the sustainability front, people did not really know what we were doing – we were doing a lot of things but we clearly weren’t communicating them properly.’

‘The first thing we did was to start on the creativity by inviting the key players from many countries to sit around the table and give them the platform to discuss things in their field and, hopefully, give us the opportunity to test directions in terms of our creativity. We wanted architects and designers to express to us what they wanted – to put them at the centre of the table – we call this our ‘Circles of Architects’. On the back of this we launched our Carpetecture concept, which fits into that architectural concept and way of working.’

Alexander is quick to point out that, whilst creativity is a real focus for Desso, functionality, sustainability, longevity and much more still lie at the heart of this company’s offering. We talk about

SoundMaster backing, for example, which offers great acoustic benefits, whilst AirMaster has been proven to reduce fine dust concentration in the air by eight times compared to a hard floor (PM 10)*. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently published a report, in which it is stated that more than two million people die every year from breathing in tiny particles present in indoor and outdoor air pollution**.

Indeed, Desso has worked with leading asthma associations and research institutes to test the product – and the results show that AirMaster could even decrease staff absenteeism. A recent report by The Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) also confirms the dust capturing performance of AirMaster. We think you’ll agree, that’s pretty impressive as far as carpet innovations go.

Heading back to the start of this article, in case you were thinking that AirMaster sounds like Nike or Reebok’s latest basketball show – well, there is a slightly surprising tie-in. ‘We’ve launched AirMaster in Holland where we have American NBA 7-times all-star Alonzo Mourning – who suffers from asthma – appearing in new Desso TV ads,’ Alexander proudly tells us. ‘This is a revolution in the carpet industry and this product is now overwhelmingly successful. We’re very pleased with it.’

Alexander reveals that the man behind the Alonzo ads is someone he first worked with at Nestlé. We believe that this kind of consumer brand thinking, coupled with this level of innovation and customer consideration, simply has to be a winner. Slam dunk!●



* Based on tests performed by GUI, with DESSO AirMaster versus standard PVC hardfloor

** http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2011/air_pollution_20110926/en/index.html