

Identity works

PEOPLE

SIMON JACOMET

LITTLE BLACK DRESS

STEFAN TAMÒ

YANGZOM BRAUEN

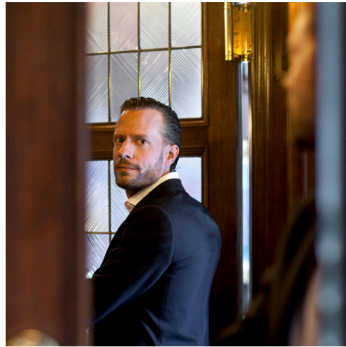
RENÉ ALLEMANN

ALFREDO HÄBERLI

René Allemann

„ Today’s consumers once again want authenticity. They want to hear the stories, see the characters – the people who are behind it. “

René Allemann helps businesses rediscover their own souls, be authentic and stand up for their own values. His agency, Branders, translates brand strategies into images and stories – into worlds that can be experienced and trust built.



Profil

NAME:	<i>René Allemann</i>
PROFESSION:	<i>CEO of the Branders Group and Editor in Chief of the online magazine thebrander.com</i>
ZURICH IS ...	<i>a lively, small city with a lot of art and cultural offerings and an incomparable quality of life.</i>
ZURICH IS NOT ...	<i>the global city it could be.</i>
MY FAVOURITE MUSIC:	<i>Arcade Fire. Amongst others.</i>
MY FAVOURITE MOVIE:	<i>„A Single Man“ by Tom Ford</i>
MY ROLE MODEL:	<i>Max Frisch</i>
A GOOD DAY STARTS WITH ...	<i>a very strong, black espresso.</i>
I'AM HAPPY WHEN...	<i>I can live every day as it is.</i>
I WOULD NEVER...	<i>want to keep someone from their future. Not even myself.</i>

"You will meet him in the Kronenhalle, and then you'll go over to his office for the interview. And please be sure to get a few shots of the restaurant when you go – they're opening the restaurant just for you". I'm amazed. For weeks, we've tried to get permission to shoot in the Kronenhalle. We've always gotten the same, laconic answer: "Closed due to renovations". Tellingly, my editor shrugged her shoulders.

Who is this Allemann?

Bellevueplatz is surely one of the nicest squares in Zurich. The pulsing heart of the city. Many streetcar lines come together here. People disembark, transfer, hastily drink an espresso in one of the many sidewalk cafés, eat a snack whilst standing, all in front of the enchanting backdrop of Lake Zurich. Old, noble Art Nouveau buildings from Switzerland's founding period, sumptuous, like the colossal grand hotel Bellevue. The rising middle class celebrating itself.

The office of Allemann's agency, elegantly historical, five-stories tall, is located right next to the venerable restaurant. On the glass door to the reception, you can see the slogan that made Allemann successful: identity works. When he shakes my hand and smiles, I know why.



Mr. Allemann, where were you 20 years ago today?

"In Australia, for seven months. That was an in-between period; the only time in my life I had so much time for myself. It was great back then, simply to travel without planning. I had no plan".

Did you want to come back? Did you know what you wanted to do afterward?

"No, but I knew what interested me. Writing excited me. Design excited me. I wrote a lot back then, was very driven. Back then, I just didn't know how to combine all of that. Then I studied business administration with an emphasis on communication. I always had a lot of luck in my life. One thing led to another. Recently somebody asked me what the biggest business setback was I'd ever experienced, and I had to tell him I hadn't had one. But there were setbacks in my private life. The death of my father. I was once married, got divorced. Both things really shaped me. Setbacks, I think, are the most affecting. Because you need to start over. I see opportunity in a lot of things.

This "positive thinking", where does that come from?

"I was always like that. I grew up in a pretty modest environment. My mother worked on the side, my parents separated early. And I'm an only child. If you're an only child you need to go outside if you want to make friends".

Allemann creates closeness quickly. His passion is contagious. We've only been in the spacious Kronenhalle's empty dining room for a few minutes, but I've already lost track of time. There's an espresso and a bottle of mineral water in front of me. I can't even remember having ordered anything. Allemann smiles enigmatically. I sense why we're here, in this place. Two female servers begin setting the tables, late 40s, with slicked-back hair and aprons. They banter with one another, place the fresh baked goods into the display. Everything has its place. The old espresso machine spits and hisses. I finally need to get to the point. Time is getting away from me.



What is a "brand"?

A brand is a business, a product that is positioning itself in the market and has some kind of relevance to its target groups. For us it's about sharpening the image. What is it that matters to you; what is it that's relevant to your target groups? These days, the consumer wants to see authentic businesses that stand up for their values.

Authentic – like the Kronenhalle?

"Yeah, the Kronenhalle happens to be a very authentic place. I find it noteworthy that people have the courage to maintain traditions in today's fast-moving times. These days, the Kronenhalle is managed by a foundation, and this might be one of the reasons it's so successful".

Allemann grins. I think he's wondering if I could follow what he said.

When do people come to you? When they're lacking customers?

Half our clients come to us because they are looking ahead, before they have a problem, because they take the market seriously. Because they want to play their own ideas against those of an expert. Our customers are the management, the board, the top level. We define the core of the brand, and then the others, like advertising agencies, for example, come along later.





Why are they suddenly listening to people like you?

"We help businesses rediscover their souls. We can't create a story that hasn't already happened. But we can bring brand stories back to life that have become dusty, or that might not be timely. Sometimes people don't know how to work with new media. Branding isn't just a strategy; it's a creation, text, language. Brand is taste. We are a kind of generalised specialist. A business consultant recognises this too – he or she will create a piece of paper with a lot of words on it. We do the same, but then we go further; transfer it into a world that can be lived, translate it into images. There is the website, the corporate video. We cover the entire chain of experiences."

Would you help someone position a new drink – one that has never existed but targets consumers of Coca-Cola or Pepsi?

"No, I'm the wrong guy for that. But I would be totally interested in working for Coca-Cola, if they want to bring a new, maybe better product on the market".

Your profession didn't exist 20 years ago. What's changed?

"Before, there were a lot more family businesses, and they had it easier as brands. They had a patron – a boss that managed everything. That is the flesh and blood of a brand. He or she provides the tempo, the culture, and maybe passes it all along to his or her children. Therefore family businesses have a clear orientation. They don't need to prove themselves on the stock market every three months, and have a long-term focus. Times have changed. Globalisation has displaced many brands and created a pace so fast that actually works against a brand. But this all created a counter-trend. Today's consumers want something authentic. They once again want to hear the stories, see the characters – the people that are behind it. That's what branding is. That means that big companies have a stronger need to convey this story: the emotionality of a product or the culture of a family business. The figures of identification don't exist anymore; CEOs and managers can sometimes change every couple of years".





Suddenly it strikes me: the meeting point, the references to traditional values, the office building in one of the most historical places in the city ...

You are a romantic. You hold onto things, try to preserve the old – the ideal. Is there a place for that these days?

"Of course. Why are the Chinese interested in French luxury goods, fashion, wine? It has to do with status, and a yearning for the real, the story, the authentic, and that will always be so".

In the meantime, we've made it to his office. On the third storey. He has a total of 20 employees: psychologists, journalists, economists, PR people. Add to that a whole army of freelancers. He is proud of his team. And for good reason. At this point, his triumphs are – even though he likes to dispute this – measurable. Those who come to him stay. Companies like the Swiss Post, Novartis, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, several Swiss banks, hotels, restaurants, wine merchants and lifestyle brands.



Identity works – does it always work?

"There are some brands where you need to admit their time is up. The moment to sell or merge has passed. In all romance you need to ask yourself: Does this all still make sense? We can't make those decisions easier for anybody. Not every brand has to survive".

Are you prepared to take responsibility? If people take your advice, rationalise, restructure, employees are laid off ...

"Yes, we are aware of this responsibility, and want to be sensitive to it".

I follow him up to the roof terrace. Old faded furniture sits in the sun. Behind it, the metre-high characters of a long-established Zurich newspaper, the backs of which are covered in rust and patina, a true original. Behind that, Lake Zurich, to the horizon. A breathtaking panorama. I look at the time and remember that I need to go back to the Kronenhalle. Take a few photos. We'll see if they let me in ...

Text and photos: Jo Weissgerber

