

ssst ... a love brand matures here



We welcome Dennis De Roover to our Sunday chair. A man who already gained a lot of knowledge and experience as POS manager of Duvel-Moortgat, and on top of that an avid Porsche fan.

Duvel-Moortgat has been brewing beer since 1871. Dennis De Roover has been brewing on ideas with his team since 2014. Building 150 years on a giant fanbase, from Breendonk to Madagascar. Sunday caught up with him before they celebrated the 150th birthday of Duvel-Moortgat to have an insightful discussion about the importance of brand management, his favorite marketing campaigns and the latest trends online and offline.

What does branding mean to you personally?

Branding – for me – is the psychological translation and expression of the core brand values. Conveying the essence of your brand in a direct and simple way. A company that has good branding is one that shows itself to the consumer in a transparent and honest way. Dare to choose and not please everyone.

Is there a brand you look up to today that knows how to do great branding?

That is a very personal question. I hope that everyone's answer lies close to their passion. For me personally, it is the brand Porsche. I think Porsche manages very well to communicate from a very strong heritage, which now would be labeled “you're killing the planet” through CO₂ and so on, but still manages to do it in a positive way. Additionally they stay true to their own DNA while reinventing themselves with the march of electric cars.

Now take the first launch of the Cayenne, an SUV Porsche, for example. The fans almost had Porsche killed for that at the time, and so many years later, it became their best-selling model.

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40-50% of their total sales volume will come from a Cayenne or a Macan. If you can reshape your hardcore fan base within a turnaround according to the value of your company and keep them on board, then I believe you are very strong brand. Stepping into the 21st century with a hardcore fan base.

Is Duvel 666 having a similar story?

I don't think you can 100% compare it to our experience with the **Duvel 666**. **Duvel 666** is really meant for a new target group. We didn't necessarily want to go for a younger target group because there are a lot of young people already drinking **Duvel**. The idea of rejuvenation with new products is not something I jump at; I believe in innovation with a purpose. You have to try to appeal to people who stand for something.

Someone of 55 or older can be very young at heart and someone of 30, like me, can be an old fart. Which I am. For me, it's about a certain target group that you're trying to appeal to. And at Porsche they thought more from the practical point of view. Not everyone likes to drive a hardcore sports car to work. Sometimes you also want to get your groceries and you need a different car, but you're still within the DNA of Porsche.

So the core was there, regardless of the fact that the segregated fan might have had a big problem with that because they believed that

could never be Porsche. And with **Duvel 666**, it was more about a different flavor profile, a different target audience, a different way of thinking, a little more extravagant.



Is there a brand you think that is past its prime? A brand that could use a refresh or rebranding right now or a brand that you see a lot of potential in? For example, the revival of Kappa. You often see things like this in the textile industry, maybe you see this in other industries as well?

I see a lot of potential in detergents. Large FMCG companies have discovered (probably in a consumer survey) that there is an evolution going on where men are taking on more household chores and also want to do the laundry. But then you see what empty commercials are being made. That's when I think to myself: why don't you start from the real world? All that fake happy joy-joy stuff really doesn't appeal to me. If there is something underlying consumer research, then it's that there is an evolution in society. If they try to tell the consumer a story in the right way, there is potential.

The thing is, I see a lot of companies struggling with this. How can we make sure that we portray

that authenticity and touch feelings through this? How do we provide authenticity within customers' lifestyles? That boldness that you see everywhere, just look at Coca Cola, who is rolling this out for youth. But that's not linear advertising anymore. Those are graphics that you flick against the screen to go and display a feeling, and somehow that feeling feels more real than the linear story that a detergent manufacturer is trying to bring.

Where would you place Duvel, if you have a scale from Detergents to Porsche?

At the end of the day, it's the consumer who has to feel something and will decide whether he/she will buy the product or service. So you're going to get different answers from each consumer. The strongest thing for me about Duvel is that it is a love brand, but at the same time it also is a hate brand. There are people who love Duvel enormously and there are people who know that Duvel will never be something for them. And that is what makes a brand strong for me. Brands, such as washing

detergents, that want to be everyone's cup of tea often get bogged down in nothing concrete. Standing for everything is standing for nothing. You have to make choices about what you stand for and what you do not stand for. Some brands also create numerous brand extensions so that every consumer can find something to their liking within the brand. Duvel has always innovated on the basis of a clear strategy whereby it is clear to us what we stand for as a brand. To now place Duvel between detergents and Porsche is a question customers will be able to answer better.

What is a controversial opinion that you have towards branding that the bulk of the marketing world would not follow you in?

I find that a difficult question because I see myself as a pragmatist. I am not that person to take a controversial position. To do that, you have to be cocky enough to believe that you are right and everyone else is wrong. And I think a lot of people are suited for that, often the people who are marketing managers, who have to knuckle down to realize their visions, which is not an easy job.

And that's just not me. I am a project manager at heart. Of course, that doesn't mean I don't stand for anything (laughs). It just means that my job is more nuanced. Collecting different perspectives and turning them into an idea is very different from convincing people that an idea is good. I try to get projects to the right people who then in turn give approval based on their knowledge and experience. Because at the end of the day, it's Michel Moortgat who decides. As it should be.

At what point in your career at Duvel did you know that you personally or with the team made an impact with branding?

For me, first and foremost, that's a long-term story you're trying to tell. In branding, there is no such thing as a one shot with which you make a difference.

The theory then says penetration is a leaking bucket. But that's also true for everything else you put into a brand. With stories you want to convey something to a certain audience. But even after a while, be aware that 80% of people haven't seen that story. So you have to persist in order for the story to stick. And over time you will start to see an evolution.

Duvel is not just for and by men. The cliché of the middle aged man with the beer belly, some salted peanuts and a **Duvel** is long gone. **Duvel** is a result of the hard work of strong, young brewers, people in accounting,... It's a mix of men and women. As for our ambassadors, there are a lot of women who do like **Duvel**. So that's a story that can take away some of that bias within the stereotypes. And we've already been able to do that through a number of products.

We've been highlighting Duvelles for a number of years now. Those are women who have been with our company for over 15 years. And on the other hand, we also have a number of collaborations with artists or people who we think excel in their craft. One of the collaborations that I am very proud of is with Studio Collect, a female driven jewelry company from Antwerp. They have reinterpreted **Duvel** as a brand by designing a limited edition collection.

Because it's not about a commercial story, it's about the message you're trying to bring. We've gotten very nice positive responses from both inside and outside the company. The whole Duvelles story, too, you can feel that



it lives within the company. Our employees are proud of that. regardless of what people think, you should drink what you want. A message that really comes from the values that **Duvel-Moortgat** stands for. Not because we want to tap into yet another new target group.

What's the coolest brand extension you've ever done?

Probably the collaboration with artist and visionary, Piet Stockmans. He created an interpretation of a **Duvel** glass in ceramic. Piet is an artist like you don't meet them very often anymore, and I thought that alone was fantastic for my own experience. Since we wanted to see what it would do for our fans, we started selling it on our webshop. The response was phenomenal. So we created a limited edition at €250 per set. Until this day we still get demands for them, but we want to maintain that exclusivity. Despite it's a world where I'm totally not comfortable in, it's fantastic that I got catapulted into it in such a way. And learn a lot from it.

Speak your mind about The Duvel Distill?

For a number of years we have taken **Duvel** beer and distilled it. Then, we age it in barrels to create something unique. If you know that our brewers mainly focus on keeping **Duvel** perfect year after year, day after day you almost get tunnel vision, so you must really want to strive for that perfection in depth. Once in a while those brewers like to be tickled as well.

This is how **Duvel** Tripel Hop came into being, from the idea of adding an extra hop for

a change and to see what it would bring. So **Duvel** Tripel Hop was a product test by triggering Brewers to do something different, create something new, an opportunity.

We made it an annual project to brew new beer with a variety of different taste profiles. We then released a tasting box so that people could choose and vote which beer we should permanently include in our range. Even though



you can put out a new product every year, you may run the risk that not every product will have that real new taste experience in it. So that project's life had come to an end, yet that's where the Citra has now come out as a permanent beer, personally my favorite as well. (laughs)

Later, it turned out that there was a hop that had something fresh, something extra that we hadn't brought out yet. And that's how Cashmere came on the market, because the brewers really thought it was worth it. At **Duvel**, our brewers are very passionate about their craft, which sometimes makes it difficult to smoothly cooperate with other departments. Because you see an opportunity, you see a gap, you see a market segment that you might be able to approach yet we will launch

when the product is right and not because it is in next year's budgets. This may be frustrating, but it is a family business.

At **Duvel-Moortgat** business is done with love. It's their name on the packaging, so they want and need to succeed as a four-generation company.

What is your dream project? Duvel X Porsche?

Duvel X Porsche would be a lot of fun for me, but branding serves to convey the values of the company. There is definitely a big overlap with Porsche, but there is also a very big difference and that is affordability. **Duvel** is affordable, Porsche is everything but affordable. I don't think that would be cut and dry for **Duvel**.

For me, the most phenomenal project we could do is to break through internationally with our different brands. **Duvel-Moortgat** is a family of breweries that each have their own beauty. There are certain beers within our portfolio like 'Goudenband' and 'Kriek-Brut' that need to get more opportunities internationally. Kriek-Brut has been aged for 15 years, and I think that is the most delicious beer I have ever drunk in my life. POINT PERIOD. And I've drunk a lot of them (laughs).

Goudenband is our most decorated beer, if you compare it to our other beers we sell figuratively maybe 20 containers of that. If I manage to get those products across to the right consumers internationally that would be the greatest thing I could accomplish here.

If you were to reflect Duvel on a fashion brand, what would it look like? Is there a brand in the world that you see Duvel in?

There is a fashion brand with which you have an automatic link and that is Furore, created by one of the daughters of the family of the

brewery. They created a fashion label from scratch with a lot of passion. And that's a great story, because you know how important the values are. The values of a family business are inherent in the family values, and then the fashion brand of one of the descendants of the family is very one-to-one.

It's a wonderful brand that has been sustainable from the start by not producing seasonal collections, for example, and then pushing those surpluses at dumping prices away into the world at huge discounts. Ecologically irresponsible if you ask me. A lot of fashion brands are now coming back from that. You can have a more profitable business model yourself by having pieceuniques or by producing on demand.

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Tell us more about Art as a common thread at the company.

Art runs through the family and the entire company. Michel Moortgat is an avid art collector. There is also the Moortgat foundation that gives people with intellectual disabilities a stage to create art themselves. There has also been a long collaboration with different museums, art fairs supported by **Duvel** and we have also had **Duvel** collection glasses made by famous and less famous artists.

But in the world of artists, fame is not always what makes the difference with quality. If you

look at our office building, the level of attention that they indicate there is huge. I also think this building feels much more modern than it is, it's over 20 years old so art is just everywhere in the details here.

What feeling do you get when you see your brand pop up in the streets?

When you work for a company, you have to be passionate about what they do. There's just no way around that. That doesn't mean you have to be 100% in the target audience yourself. I worked for L'Oréal before this, from self-tanners to hair products as Elnett brand manager. I can assure you then that you are not in the target group. (laughs) But you have to be convinced of what the company stands for. That what they're trying to bring as a service or as a service to the consumer, that it's damn good.

And in **Duvel** I believe. And not just in **Duvel**, but in all the brands we have. I'm always super proud when I see one of the beers, because that just shows that there are people who put that product in their pub and believe in it. To then also bring that to their consumers. Because without the pubs, **Duvel** wouldn't be who they are. And certainly abroad, that's even more special. In Belgium it's very nice because it feels so familiar. When you go abroad and you see locals and/or tourists enjoying one of our products, well that feels like holding a golden nugget.

What are the most extreme places you've spotted Duvel?

Myanmar is the craziest place I have found **Duvel**. Niels Vandecasteele saw **Duvel** at a supermarket in Costa Rica, a whole shelf full of Belgian beers. There are some great places to see **Duvel** like Madagascar. There aren't that many malagasy who can afford it, unfortunately, but that does something to a

person. That is the Belgian pride. If we can be patriotic for once as Belgians. (laughs)

For you, what is the difference between a brand and a love brand?

'The strengths of the values and the choice they make not to be there for everyone. To give an example: Ecology plays an important role. So much so that within brands, it has become a big hygiene factor. Which is a good thing. Nobody can be against ecology, so it's logical that as a company you are committed to it. But then there are some values that you have to choose as a brand.

Duvel has a certain value, it is a tasting beer and you can't drink eight of them. So there you already make a choice. You could make a very sweet **Duvel** but if that would still be a **Duvel**, that remains the question. You could stick a



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Duvel label on it and turn up the volume. **Duvel** is a great brand and you can do a lot with it, but you would destroy the essence of your brand. To me, that's the difference between a brand, a well-known label, and making something that isn't what that label stands for anymore. I find that love brands do that very successfully. They say what they stand for and stand for what they say.

What tips would you give to yourself when you started? To that younger version of yourself?

I think I would most likely give tips about myself. I once started from the idea, hold on to your seat because it's pretty ridiculous, that I only have 44 years to accomplish everything I want. You light the rocket and then just go, that's what I thought having a career was like. It took me a few years to realize that that's not the case and I have to enjoy the process as well. Life is yin and yang. Having a son of just under a year makes you realize that even more. I know it's a cliché that is kind of ridiculous. (laughs) But some clichés are also true. You can enjoy life and achieve the right things professionally. A lot of that has to do with making choices.

My first manager at **Duvel**, taught me that when you choose to stand for something, you at the same time choose what you don't stand for. As opposed to doing a little bit of everything, you are honest and tell people what you will and won't do. That way, you don't burn yourself out and make an impact in the things you do. I'm still enormously grateful to her for that, because that's what I would say to myself if I were starting over tomorrow. If I manage to convince myself of course. (laughs) It's a trajectory, you have to get to a certain point. I learned a lot at L'Oréal by doing what I did there. A double, but beautiful answer I think.