

11. Exki

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Fastgood



Launched in 2000 by Frédéric Rouvez, Arnaud de Meeûs and Nicolas Steisel, the Exki fast food restaurant chain has 25 restaurants in Belgium, six of them in Wallonia, and 17 others abroad. “In the beginning,” recalls Laurent Kahn, General Manager of Exki, “incorporating sustainable development into the company was not part of our plans. Our foundation and our “raison d’être” was to offer restaurant food that was fast but healthy and balanced, to be savoured in a pleasant setting ...” In their search for high-quality food, the managers of Exki were very quickly led to work with organic products. That was followed by the gradual establishment of a positive dynamic: “From organic products, we arrived at fair trade, and since then we have not stopped progressing into sustainable development.” When the chain decided for example to change coffee brands, for reasons of service, its managers met the people from Max Havelaar by chance. “We told ourselves that it was obvious that it was necessary to do fair trade! But after the coffee, there was the sugar, the chocolate and so on. Once you pull on the ball of yarn, it never ends!” Therefore it was naturally and little by little that Exki built up its character and image as a responsible company, first by chance through encounters and opportunities, “with the basic desire to perform its work while feeling well as a backdrop.”

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The chain’s staff has played a role as a driver in its approaches from the start: “A good many of our employees came to work with us because there was a different spirit. Some of them, already very committed to sustainable development, pushed us to go further.” Aware of what an asset that the meeting of the staff members around common centres of interests was, the “Exki-managers” made respect for the environment and for people the guiding theme of their development. In 2006, the need

made itself felt to provide a defined framework for this company philosophy. “Things fell into place, with a keen interest in sustainable development. In a flash, from our position that sometimes appeared almost crazy, we passed almost for experts. We had more and more questions from the outside world: we were invited to speak on this subject although we didn’t have any strategy. That’s where the desire to shape one came from.” The chain then hired a trainee in ecological advising to make an appraisal of its actions. In the course of two years, the young woman helped Exki evaluate its different environmental procedures. “Sometimes we believe that certain actions are extra good while in terms of impact, they are not necessarily important. We have sometimes been confronted with a difficult balance to be struck between the desire to do things, acceptance by the customers, the cost and sometimes the real ecological purpose:” around 2003, for example, the chain tried to offer cutlery made of wood, as an alternative to implements made of plastic. “We were rather convinced, but it was too different for the customers, who did not appreciate their texture. We had to withdraw them.” The company then found another solution with cutlery with a plant material basis... and noticed very quickly that they melted in the soup! “We found a third solution with magnificent cutlery that did not melt in the soup and after two months we realized that if we continued we would lose an enormous amount of money.” Exki then decided to go back to cutlery made of plastic, and took time to find the economically viable solution in place in its restaurants today... Making advances in a responsible way most certainly requires patience and tenacity!

In 2008, the WWF offered to Exki to calculate its ecological footprint. “We said yes without completely knowing what we were getting involved in. All the same, it was rather far-reaching: it’s an enormous calculation with many data.” At the end of a year, the assessment was instructive, however: “it gave us a good analysis of the points that we had to work on. We realized that electricity was what weighed the heaviest in our ecological



footprint.” Following this appraisal, Exki committed itself to a plan to reduce its ecological footprint by 25% before the end of the year 2010. This objective is included in a wider action plan called Re-think, which formalises the company’s undertakings around four focal points: health, work, the environment and partnership. The simple measures already taken are making the managers of Exki optimistic as to meeting this challenge: transition to green electricity, heat recovery of the compressors in the refrigerators to heat water, use of recycled paper and Ecover cleaning products, sorting of waste offered to the customers, and reduction in packaging thanks to the “Green Card”, a loyalty card rewarding the customer who re-use paper sacks, cotton bags, and thermally insulated mugs. The chain’s bosses are already thinking of solutions that they will establish to go further than the first 25 percent, the easiest. Working on an ambitious mobility plan, the company is also specifically discussing the question of wastes. Trying to reduce the number of pre-packaged products, currently Exki is also using around 75% of its packages either with a base of recycled plastic, or recyclable or compostable. “We want to progress further and if possible arrive at 100%. And we hope soon to put in place the composting of our organic wastes and if possible of our packaging!”

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While in catering the cost price of the merchandise represents 25% of the selling price, at Exki it climbs to 40%. “Using cutlery with a plant matter base costs us 75,000 euro more per year than plastic. Training, important for us, represents a budget of 180 000 euro.” The return on investment is difficult to estimate: the company measures it above all on the motivation of the staff and the loyalty of



the customers. "It is not what makes them come to us, but what makes them come back, and creates an affection for the brand. This is an investment over the long term. Exki only experienced its first slightly positive net results in 2009." And Laurent Kahn recalls that this type of project "must always be a good balance between dream and reality" (economic): the chain accepts its status as a commercial enterprise, with full honesty and quite naturally. "Our activity is not to save the planet. But we have always been convinced that we can direct a commercial enterprise and make a profit while taking care of what surrounds us to the maximum extent possible, whether this is the environment or the people!"

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Isabelle Masson for REcentre

Interviewee / Laurent Kahn, General manager

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www.exki.be

Sector • Fast food

Year of foundation • 2000

Number of employees • 480

Turnover (foreseen 2010) •
48 million EUR