

# 28. United Pepper



## Green Geeks



Jean-Pierre D'Haese

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In the spring of 2009, Jean-Pierre D’Haese, Marc Aelbrecht and Xavier Petre, were looking to give a new orientation to their career. All three carrying impressive baggage within major groups like Alacatel-Lucent, Cisco, and Sytec, the managers joined together due to the desire to embark on a project with a societal dimension. “We had the common desire to do something in the area of fair trade and ecology, to give foundations and depth to our approach by putting our experience to work on ideas that are more difficult to sell.” In this way the trio very quickly decided to buy out the business of Dies Europe, a company that had existed since 2007, and which already owned the brand United Pepper. Starting in September 2009, the three partners took up this name again to baptise their budding company (sprl): “Pepper symbolises the South, and United the link that we hope to establish between the North and the South: this name fits our project perfectly!”

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In the business acquired, there then remained a few small Lily: a webcam for which the octopus case was made of cotton and kapok, was filled with sand from the Mekong. “There were also, in the company’s cardboard boxes, agreements for the manufacturing of computer peripherals such as the one with a Vietnamese factory located in Ho Chi Minh City and Tradecraft certified.” Wanting to continue to produce computer peripherals that are as green as possible, the company United Pepper took on the services of a technological watch: “a person who was located in Shenzhen, on the other side of Hong Kong, where quite a lot of electronics are created. There we found our basic electronics, we tried to transform them to make them more ecological, in a

totally fair process, within our certified factory.” But the most important thing, in the eyes of these neo-entrepreneurs, is the value of commitment that these products represent: “We are not selling electronics, we are selling a symbol, a value.”

For this reason, United Pepper is not turning to the usual major distribution channels of computer products, but has chosen to distribute its range through specialised channels, such as Oxfam, or its own web site. The start-up also chose to visit the major companies, more and more of which are making commitments in terms of societal responsibility, as they are mentioned in the Le Livre Blanc de l’Europe and will soon be certified through the new ISO26000 standard relating to the application of the principles of sustainable development. United Pepper proposes to them to display this undertaking in good governance through fair and responsible products that can be made to measure and in line with their image. “For example, we had the logos of Crédit Agricole printed on Fair trade electronic card readers”, itemises Jean-Pierre D’Haese. “But it must be confessed that this market is not easy. Tomorrow everyone will have to be ethical. But today we are still in a transition phase. Although they are attempting to transmit high symbolic values, these gadgets intrinsically have a low material value. A great many of the customers are still tempted to order them at a low price, directly from Chinese companies.”

On the basis of this finding, United Pepper has developed a 'home tablet' comparable to Apple’s I-Pad, but intended to be more intuitive and arising from green technologies and from fair trade. This small computer with a touch screen, without a keyboard and equipped with WiFi, is intended to offer very simple access to technology. In the same spirit, United Pepper is devoted to proposing new specialised applications: “The tablet can also be an additional relay station between older people and their doctors. It has also already been used to allow surgeons to receive data in the operating room. It is also a solution for isolated places: we are in negotiation with the Ministry

of Health in Vietnam concerning the acquisition of tables intended for rural dispensaries.”

The intuitiveness of the use of this terminal is taken into account in the evaluation of its societal impact. United Pepper assigns each of its products a dual index, calculating the environmental impact on the one hand, and the ethical impact on the other hand, based on objective criteria. “An object is never 100% green or 100% ethical,” explains Jean-Pierre D'Haese. “For example, cotton, even though it is not plastic, requires a great deal of water for its production.” The reason that Jean-Pierre D'Haese and his supernumeraries consider themselves agents of transition: “We cannot change Chinese technology, but the choice of components can influence the quality of the final product from the environmental point of view. The fact that we wanted to create an intuitive device allowed us to eliminate the large keyboard. The shell is made of rice fibre or of bamboo. The processor was chosen to distil less heat, and therefore to do without fans. The batteries are smaller, have a longer service life and therefore less impact. This is not a fixed approach, but a dynamic one!”

## It's all about calculating the environmental impact on the one hand and the ethical impact on the other hand.

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Pioneers in the new economy, the three partners are aware of the difficulty of the role that they have taken on. “In a way we are evangelists,” considers Jean-Pierre D'Haese, “our role is appeal to consciences... without moralising! Which pushes us to be inventive!” A philosophy that United Pepper also applies in its work as adviser to companies that want to establish a societal approach. Besides this activity, the young company has just established the beginnings of a partnership contract with an alter ego company in Hong Kong. Innovasians, a



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Jack ID © United Pepper



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Series Lili © United Pepper



company specialising in organic textiles, managed by Lisette Smook, is offering a series of products that are complementary to United Pepper's range. Together the 2 companies intend to extend their offerings and create a network that will allow them to reach a critical size indispensable to their future. Although United Pepper is not yet profitable, the start-up has already achieved a financial equilibrium. The company is not yet able to remunerate its managers, nor to hire staff, but Jean-Pierre D'Haese advises those to whom United Pepper is giving ideas to follow their instincts while not forgetting the basic rules: "People can believe in chance, but it is necessary to organise. It is necessary to start simply, without tackling too many things at once, by limiting the number of products, and by always keeping the finances balanced. It is necessary to be enthusiastic every day, and preferably surrounded by friends: motivation comes from a team. Three heads are better than one!"

Isabelle Masson for REcentre

Interviewee / Jean-Pierre D'Haese, Co-shareholder with Marc Aelbrecht and Xavier Petre.

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Sector • Sustainable computer materials

Year of foundation • 2009

Number of employees • N/A

Turnover (2009) •  
100.000 EUR