

29. Van Houtum



The black Strategy of green



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Henk van Houtem
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The only company in the world to produce Cradle to Cradle certified toilet paper, has acquired enormous brand familiarity these past few years and even had a top year during the economically terrible year 2009. Family business Van Houtum has succeeded in what many entrepreneurs still find a huge obstacle: successfully commercialising sustainability.

Over a thousand people came to take a look at the Van Houtum site during the open day in July, reports the toilet tissue manufacturer. This is a lot, as the company situated in Swalmen doesn't exactly make exciting products: toilet paper, towels, tissue paper, soap and dispensers, which aren't even sold directly to consumers. The interest of the general public is roused by the stream of publicity the company generated with sustainable business practices and products. The icing on the cake is the presentation of Satino Black: Cradle to Cradle Silver certified towels and toilet paper that rolled off the conveyor belt partly due to a financial injection of an almost two hundred thousand euro OP Zuid subsidy.

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A decade ago, the average Limburger had probably not heard of the company founded in 1935. Corporate social responsibility was in its blood quite early on, says second generation operating manager Henk van Houtum. "As is often the case in family businesses, my father and uncle were very involved with their employees. They visited people when they were ill and collected employees celebrating their anniversary from their homes." In the 1960s, the brothers were the second tissue company in Europe to start using recycled paper as a raw material, not from an ecological point of view, but because of its financial benefits. In the meantime, the first argument does apply

and all Van Houtum paper that leaves the factory gates is made of household and office paper waste. About 15 years ago, the family had a complete energy power plant built on the factory site, so energy could be used cheaper and more efficiently. Van Houtum is continuously making these types of investments in corporate social responsibility: they claim it's a million euro every year. When the market position was examined internally in 2005, the conclusion was that the distinctive character lay in corporate social responsibility. "Others pointed this out regularly, but we didn't say much about it to the outside world." Communication was raised to a higher level in order to be a success in the competitive world of the paper business. Van Houtum took full advantage of the Chamber of Commerce's opportunity to be a trial company for a C2C scan in the run up to the 2012 Floriade, which is all about C2C. The scan was paid for by the Chamber of Commerce and the outcome was so interesting that the path to certification was chosen. We know the result.

In 1 or 2 years' time, 10 per cent of turnover should come from Satino Black products ("we chose 'black' because so much is called 'green' these days, plus green ink is much more toxic than black ink, so Cradle to Cradle packaging would be harder to make"). The end user is increasingly kept in mind when aiming for this target. "Wholesalers -to whom we supply- are having difficulty 'selling' sustainability. They offer a wide range of brands and don't really focus on sustainability, so we offer them a helping hand. Customers who buy Satino Black are given a small sign for all their restrooms mentioning the certification and other quality marks. This enables companies to show that they take sustainable decisions." What probably simplifies the choice even more is the fact that Satino Black isn't more expensive than the competition, so a customer can clear his conscience without this having an effect on his budget. You would think that the ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment would be the first to wipe their bottoms with Black paper, but this is far from true. Such a 'switch' first

has to go through the wheels of government that turn extremely slowly. The result is that the toilet walls in The Hague don't have any signs yet, while the Province of Limburg is flaunting Van Houtum.

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The entrepreneur has to often face this rigidity and much more. "Our waste paper hasn't been dumped for 15 years, but used as raw material by other companies. Smurfit Kappa Roermond Papier processes it into testliner, which is then used by an auxiliary in the production of corrugated cardboard boxes. In turn, we purchase these from them. This cooperation would have never come about if we had followed all the rules. We first needed to carry out some tests, wittingly breaking the law. According to Van Houtum, national government bureaucracy and the very non-proactive attitude are major obstacles on the road to a sustainable economy. He has serious criticism on the regulations drawn up by SenterNovem concerning the government's sustainable procurement policy: there are far too many and they are so general that almost every company can meet them. "The fear of legal misses has a paralysing effect. The national government should facilitate companies instead of nailing up everything with legislation. Give sustainable innovation a chance and stimulate the frontrunners." Van Houtum contributes by giving workshops to wholesalers and sharing knowledge with other entrepreneurs, while regularly concentrating on new steps. Because household and office waste paper isn't plentiful ("the highest bidder usually wins and a lot ends up in China"), the family business has developed a commercial recycling concept. Paper sold to the Swalmen business is guaranteed to return to its place of origin as toilet tissue, with the help of waste processor Van Gansewinkel Group. This way, Van Houtum hopes to be certain of enough recyclable paper in the long run and 'suppliers'



Satino Black © Van Houtum

annex users cooperate on a more sustainable vision close to home.

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Musing on ideals, Henk Van Houtum has a vision of an innovative factory that sets new standards, produces 100% CO2 neutral, has potential employees lined up, supplies superfluous energy to the direct environment and looks so good that the prices of the surrounding real estate increase. The time span: 5 to 10 years. An extremely ambitious aim? Definitely. Impossible? Who's to say. An entrepreneur at the head of the country's 45 Best Managed Companies with thick black figures in the books, two ARBO trophies on the shelf and an increase in turnover for export of 400% in the past decade shouldn't be underestimated. This person usually has some progressive vision and isn't sheepish. Speaking of sheep, those visiting the Van Houtum processing plant will notice something. "One of our operators often saw the lawnmower pass by. He came up with a proposal and now we have sheep grazing on the land. I'm proud of this, that everyone in this company understands what sustainability is all about."

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Gwen Teo voor REcentre
Geinterviewd / Henk van Houtum, Managing director

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Boutestraat 125
6071 JR Swalmen
The Netherlands

www.vanhoutum.nl

Sector • Toilet tissue

Year of foundation • 1935

Number of employees • 200

Turnover (2009) •
60 million EUR

