



Declaration of independence

Interview

Anja Graf

Group CEO and Chairwoman, VISIONAPARTMENTS

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Anja Graf, Group CEO and Chairwoman of VISIONAPARTMENTS, had already founded her own modelling agency by the age of 16 before discovering a gap in the market at 18: nobody seemed to be offering short-term, furnished rental accommodation, which could be rented by models and business travellers. The first principal at her commercial high school encouraged her, her father advised caution and her second school principal accused her of being “out of her mind”. She knew right away which route to take.

Ms. Graf, your company now offers more than 1,800 of its own short-term rental solutions. You focus on German-speaking areas but you also have a global footprint. How have you managed all this?

Anja Graf: Back in the 1990s, there were a lot of vacant office spaces so I rented a property with 16 offices and installed a kitchen and a shower. Prospects immediately showed interest. I even had to expand, adding a second building, and, once again, demand exceeded supply.

So you were doing a lot of things right, by the sound of it?

Yes, I noticed that I was onto something. The question was, what would that mean for me? I left school and decided to go all in. I didn't get a wink of sleep for three weeks but I followed through with my plan. I founded VISIONAPARTMENTS and built up my business in Switzerland over the following ten years.

Were you satisfied with that?

Yes, extremely. I had 60 employees working for me and I owned 600 flats at just 29 years of age. But I wanted to take things even further. Initially, I had managed everything myself but the company grew with the demand and, when I expanded abroad, I brought a professional management team on board. Then we moved to Warsaw.

Turning your back on Switzerland?

No, anything but. We haven't leased our premises since 1999, we've been buying them, so VISION-APARTMENTS owns a lot of properties in Switzerland and the portfolio is constantly expanding. But with Poland joining the EU, I saw great potential there as well. We also wanted to establish our back-office in Poland. At this point we wrote down all our processes and implemented everything in our IT infrastructure – the life-cycle of a rental contract, information related to our architecture teams, our in-house IT and much more.

How important is digitalisation?

We see the central siting of our properties as one of our USPs. Besides our excellent locations, digital considerations are crucial. We started “going digital” more than ten years ago; our customers were able to book online even back then. Today, a booking with us is completed in 30 seconds, while some of our competitors are still using an enquiry form. We moved away from this approach a long time ago, because our customers want to be served quickly, easily and efficiently throughout the whole customer journey.

“It is vital to stay true to yourself and be as independent as possible.”

And in-house?

Computers are key here, too. In our company, everything has been digitally thought through and networked. Our workflow runs strictly in accordance with our IT. Even all inventory: if a nightstand breaks, the cleaning staff reports this via tablet, the Support Centre takes over, sends a request to logistics, the new item is ordered and replaced two weeks later.

Where does this affinity for IT stem from?

That was my vision: to cover 95 per cent with a single system and automate as much as possible. We were the first to swap out all our cylinder locks and replace them with a key code system. When people turn up exhausted from their journey, they no longer have the hassle of looking for a reception desk or handing back a key when they check out. The correct codes are sent securely and punctually. Customer convenience is our top priority.

You had outsourced your IT operations to Poland but now you are working with Ergon in Switzerland. How did that come about?

We wanted to develop a sophisticated property management system to form the backbone of our business. It is a very complex system and needed to be of best company quality, which was the main criterium. Ergon convinced me with its way of working, project management and competent and committed people. Also here: I took the right decision.

“Our customers want to be served quickly, easily and efficiently throughout the whole customer journey.”

You're clearly a "mover and shaker". What do you think defines such personalities?

You just need to move and shake! Don't be timid, don't get hung up on covering your back from every angle. Don't get stuck in a rut, spot your chances, but stay flexible and adaptable as well. Have the courage to say: "We have to change something, we can do things better". It is vital to stay true to yourself and be as independent as possible.

What are you most proud of?

This will surprise you: my four children! My two boys and two girls have to go without some things, they have to be independent and show some understanding when I can't always be there for them. They are really good at that and I'm very grateful to them. And of course my staff, who works with me – this sense of togetherness is so important. Success is always a joint effort.

Questions about the article?

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