



English translation Voka article

Henri Valcke - Valcke Group

"Only winning counts"

Henri Valcke represents the third generation in the family business, which has its roots in the 1960s and is dedicated to the leisure industry. In just five years, he has earned himself the status as 'Mister Europe'. On behalf of the US group Brunswick (the leading supplier of bowling equipment worldwide), he is the exclusive agent in just under 10 European countries. He was also given exclusivity to sell on the French market fitness equipment from US giant Life Fitness.



Back in 2016, when you took up the torch within the family business. Are you standing now where you dreamed of then?

"We are honestly already further along. With our 2 companies, we have grown tremendously. But we are not going to float. 2020 and 2021 were horrible years. 100% of our customers were every near 18 months closed. As a supplier, which did not advertise 'compulsorily close', we could, apart from technical unemployment, hardly count on any support. I look back at that period with feelings of anxiety and gratitude. Anxiety because surely it is crazy how a company can implode overnight because of an external factor. And at the same time also gratitude for what I learned. I see that period as my personal Harvard. The power of strong balance, the interactions between result and balance sheet and a clear market strategy have kept us afloat. In addition, we have also taken the opportunity to push the reset button. Everything that was not running well, we addressed and so we emerged many times stronger out of the corona crisis. 2022 is the fine result of that and 2023 already looks very promising too."

How would you describe that reset?

"In our bowling division, we went from being a local player operating in Belgium and France to a European scale, mainly through acquisitions and by winning new concessions. Bowling has become part of the leisure industry and no longer has the 'Big Lebowski' image. We have created an image that is trendy and linked to a social experience. In our fitness division in the French market, after 10 years, we cracked the code to break in. Far too long, I know, but there are hundreds of reasons for that. I just wanted to never give up. Now we have become a key player of the major fitness chains. The fitness market, in comparison to bowling, has so much more potential and growth opportunities. In France there are fitness chains that open 20-30 venues per year and there are 5 chains with more than 200 locations. Fitness is surfing the trend that people want to look good and take care of themselves by living healthier and exercising. We also work in the hotel market and medical market."

In you is a pure-bred entrepreneur with a keen eye for strategy, that is clear. Is there such a thing today like a 2030 plan?

"A vision 2030 might be a bit too far ahead, especially considering how fast the world is turning and changing. But there is a long-term direction that we are working towards and a strategic plan 2025. On today we are working hard to be macroeconomically resistant and to be as little as possible dependent on variables. This can be done through good inventory management, for example, so that the supply chain does not experience shocks and also temporary exchange rate shocks can be absorbed. In addition we also spread geographical risks and strict cash management. Final it may be clear that thanks to our European bowling platform (monthly good for 500,000 euros worth of bowling balls and spare parts) we can also create opportunities for the fitness market. I consider our group as a small multinational with enormous growth potential, ideal for employees who want to develop internationally. But with our team of 50 people, we speak 5 languages and we have a different payroll systems in all countries with sales people, installers and technicians. Now we need to put that accumulated knowledge and experience into a playing field with 300 million people."

"I see the corona period as my personal Harvard."

Was the decision to diversify (fitness alongside bowling) a crucial move on the chessboard of the Valcke Group? Or rather the result of an opportunity that came your way?

"At the time, it was an opportunity that came on my father's path. We were at home with 3 children and had 2 activities: own bowling operation and wholesale business. When the opportunity of fitness presented itself, my parents thought, 'perfect, then we have 3 activities, something for everyone'. But my sister was still in school at the time and our advisory board indicated that I should pick that up in anticipation, given that fitness was closer to my activity. I hardly knew any French and knew nothing of the industry. Over the years I really sweated and toiled: recruited people and fired, continuously restarted started over, tried to build a network by going to untold amounts of dinners and being everywhere. But the bulk of our competitors signed up for 50 million euros turnover or more and their customers were seemingly quite satisfied. So start trying to compete with that from Wevelgem. But with a great team and an efficient strategy, we have broken new ground. We know the competition's pain points and we have tailored our unique selling points accordingly. Now our sales are growing monthly."

Valcke Group remains until further notice family anchored. Is that a must? It can hardly be otherwise or the private equity has already discovered you and also made proposals.

"In my opinion, a family should not cling to a company. The company should be leading. The shareholders should do what is best for the company, because that is ultimately what is best for the family. Growing with external capital? If that makes the company better and stronger, why not? On the other hand, I see that all stakeholders believe in our story, so on today it is also good without external capital. Then maybe it will be a bit slower, but even slower is currently still very fast. I am now 37, have a top family and own all the shares of 2 nice growth companies. What does a man want more?"



"I consider our group to be a small multinational with huge growth potential."

How do you get that foreign expansion managed?

"The difference is made by the team, a dream team. I really have a powerful team of people who put in so much energy every day. We are currently building up our middle management, but are doing so very gradually. We really do want the right profiles in the right places. I don't have a degree and started working at 19. So a lot of theories I don't know. I just speak my expectations very clearly without too much narrative. Even our French employees now appreciate that. To our sales people I say: 'You are paid to sell and if you don't sell you don't have a job.' Furthermore, I want to communicate continuously with my team. I don't want to be the manager in his ivory tower. Being busy with strategy, I do that at night in my bed or when I'm jogging. During the day, I am full time in the field with the team."

How would you describe yourself as a manager?

"I am a sales-driven CEO with masses of energy. And things have to be right, or things don't go my way. I am quite direct, dislike meetings and like to have bold people around me. Things have to move forward and there needs to be clear communication with everyone on board. I expect excellence as the standard. Excellence really does not mean expensive. Excellence means 'world class basics'. No rocket science, but doing the ordinary things just right and be easy to deal with. A customer requesting a quotation should receive it within 24 hours, an order must leave the same day to the customer, a technical call has to be handled quickly, a project must run smoothly in terms of communication and installation. It must be an enjoyable experience for the customer. I hate it when someone says they don't have time or that this is not his job. Employees have to like to work here and work hard and we provide in-house as much as possible to create a fun atmosphere. I try to ensure, together with my wife Charlotte, that people come to work with a smile. Finally, I am also a leader who believes in family values and standards. First and foremost, that means that you have to respect employees and listen to their desires. If someone has to work from home once because their child is sick, then that should not be a problem."

What is it like to work with major listed US companies genre Brunswick and Life Fitness? No little guys.

"They are your best friend as long as you grow and pay. They only want to hear the good news."

Is there also enough space to push own visions through?

"Yes there is. Americans do not understand Europe. Just as Europeans don't understand Americans. We are now also involved in their product developments that are adapted to European needs."

Entrepreneurs have been complaining for decades that the politicians should give entrepreneurs more space to do business. There seems to have changed very little on that front, right?

"In Belgium and in Europe, you invariably get the impression that people are doing everything they can to give headwinds. How else can you explain that unemployment is unlimited in time, while all companies are looking for people. Working is the most heavily taxed of all activities, isn't that complete madness? Do the people in Brussels actually realise what the impact of indexation (half of the indexation goes to the state treasury) and energy prices on a company's cost structure in a European competitive context? It is really striking how much Belgium has deteriorated in recent years. Did you know that in the Netherlands, the first 300,000 euros of profit is taxed at only 15%? What does an entrepreneur do with profits? Reinvest, invest and consume. Surely that helps the economy? All those fine companies that are leaving South-West Flanders or investing elsewhere... that's alarm phase red, I would think. In my opinion, Belgium should be led by someone like a Luc Tack, someone who will come and put some order."

*(Karel Cambien - pictures Stefaan Achtergael)
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