

Shoe repair: sustainability and solidarity

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In 1983, my wife Els and I took over the shoe repair shop from my father René who started in 1956 and whose business still bears the name. After my secondary school, I followed the economic direction, then military service came and although I had the free choice to continue studying, I went for the craft. I didn't really have to learn the trade itself as I was born surrounded by shoes and leather, and raised together with and by our first employees. Before I really got started I did an internship at the shoe repair shop of Luc Van Immerseel in Antwerp. It was the period of the heels bar: pen heels were hot and turnover was more important than quality. I learned a lot about it commercially, organizationally and professionally. I kept in mind that delivering quality is a guarantee for a sustainable future of your company.

In this talk, I will discuss the evolution of my business as well as the shoe sector at large. Gradually it will become clear that the social, economic and environmental sustainability of my own business and that of the shoe sector at large are at risk.

So I took over the business from my parents together with my wife Els. Business went very well and despite her extreme love for her profession - Els was a full time and very committed nurse - she gave up her career and took over the management of our company. Looking back, I am convinced that without her I would never have reached what we realized today.

We expanded the business into a modern company that at its peak - just before the turn of the century - had 6 branches and 17 employees. The sky was the limit and there was never a shortage of work, but the older employees retired and finding new employees was more difficult than expected. Vocational training was non-existent but we succeeded in providing training in our own company thanks to government support. 4 out of 6 shops were located in 2 bigger cities. In those two cities we chose to keep the shop located in the commercially most favourable part of town and closed the other. Each of the 2 own businesses had a similar evolution: after some time the location in the expensive main street was abandoned and we opted for an investment. Instead of renting, we bought buildings with a good

location and good accessibility. The 2 shops located in smaller cities were sold to the employees who ran it. Now, 20 years later, both shops are still open and there is a regular collegial contact with the old employees.

Meanwhile we write 2018 and we have gained tons of experience: we are no longer afraid when every few years the work supply decreases somewhat: economy is a wave motion, so results come back. Why does the work supply fluctuate ? Our sector is rather fashion-sensitive: pen heels require much more repair work than platform shoes, the supply of imported "clutter" from China and cheap production countries is growing, the customer is being bogged down with an enormous range of colours and models and types and has to divide up his budget to meet all his needs, which obviously results in a loss of quality.

In addition, new competitors entered the market. For a few years now, the large mega store chains have been absorbing the market and the small shoe seller is losing the competition. As a result, many small shoe retailers disappear and even more cheap shoes come onto the market. But the latest competitor has been the most challenging so far, even for the vested mega chain stores: the internet.

Needless to say: social media are transforming our world into one big selfish society. Where in theory you would assume that we would become more social, you have the opposite result: we no longer talk, we no longer communicate - at least not face to face. Clients no longer buy based on word of mouth and especially no longer based on emotions. In the past, clients used to visit a shoe retailer because they knew that he stood for quality. Clients bought solid shoes that were cast at your feet. But this is over: clients click and open a gigantic catalogue and a few days later their new shoes are delivered at their front door. If the shoes don't fit: no problem, just send them back. Clients don't have to defend themselves or invent lies - they can just send them back.

Now you wonder what worries me as a shoe repairer. As I mentioned before, the economy evolves like a wave. Yet in my 40-year career, I have never experienced such a long persistence of the downward trend. And what's worse, there are few signs that things are getting better. Internet sales are growing and growing. The retailers in town, who sell qualitative shoes, perish one by one. The quality of most shoes and especially the women's shoe has dropped to a very dubious level. Sometimes I wonder if those shoe designers

actually know what they are doing. I understand that they use new colours or shades or prints or even new materials in their drawings. On the contrary I do not support the ever frequent designs that lead to a quick breakdown of shoes or cause pain. Think of the way they put metal pads in places on the shoe that should be flexible. Such metal pads prevent the shoe from bending along with your step. Or the fact that they attach pearls in such a way and in all possible and more often impossible places on the shoe that with every movement or step they have to falter somewhere. Or the fact that they don't even care about the most essential laws of orthopaedic proportion. Should I, as a shoe repairer, not worry about that?

Yes, so. The offered work consists more and more of small "clutter" repairs: gluing loose soles, attaching pearls, stitching decorative seams, ... It makes price setting hard, since accounting for the time spent makes the cost for reparation high, compared to what the client originally paid for the shoe. The beautiful work such as repairing soles and heels, becomes rarer and rarer.

We can't stagnate there, we have to do something. As a merchant you don't have much choice. If you want to keep sufficient turnover you have to diversify. Maintenance products, keys, license plates, stamps and since a few years we are focusing on a new segment: engraving. But it is painful to experience that your core business is no longer sufficient by itself to keep the company afloat. The time when 100% of the turnover of the shoe repair shop consisted of shoe repairs has long since passed. When I look at the evolution of my own company, I see that at the time of the takeover of my father's company, the proportions were spread over 80% repairs and 20% sales of related products: polish, insoles, lasts, ... Afterwards the keys were added and even later the license plates and stamps and many colleagues switched to supplying small orthopaedic products such as orthotics. Today we have periods when repairs still account for 40% of the turnover, the sale of maintenance items 10, the keys 30 and the rest: engravings, number plates, stamps, etc. 20%. So we manage to keep the turnover the same but it requires efforts, investments and especially a lot of training. An additional problem is that we have difficulties teaching the boys who were trained as shoe repairers doing all other things. Copying keys is in principle child's play, but recognizing and translating key codes is truly specialist work. When we started making new keys, there were two types of keys: the cylinder key and the beard key. Of the one, you had about a hundred, of the other, about six brands. Today, in the cylinder key segment

alone, there are hundreds of brands and each brand has its own key with security card, there are the toothed keys, the drilled keys, the transponder keys, the tubular keys, the cross keys, and so on. Here too, globalisation has hit hard: in the past, every region had its own brand, but now every key maker is offered keys from all over the world. Two examples: if you used to bring in a key for the mailbox, you could choose between about four types. Today - if you want to follow daily trends - you have an assortment of 20 to 30 different brands, ranging from local Belgian brands to Eastern European and Russian brands to the inevitable Chinese ones. Example two: car keys. Previously we were only confronted with keys from European and American cars. Today, cars come from all over the world : European, American, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Indian,... It is almost impossible to keep up but there is only one motto: if you start, you have to go for it, for the full range. Producing car license plates used to be a manual activity, but nowadays it's done completely automatically. This does not require large investments and sometimes one has a windfall. When our government decided a few years ago, to change the license plates for cars, this was a great opportunity for the colleagues who made license plates and a big financial gain. The art of engraving too underwent its own digital evolution. At our shop we started with a manual pentograph: we made tokens for dogs and cats and small plastic plates for house doors. Because we noticed that the offer and the range of products were getting bigger and bigger, we evolved along with it: new machines required big investments, not only in machines but also in training and even in new workspace. When my son-in-law came into the business in 2015, I had the intention to be a little less in the shoe shop myself and to take a quiet step back. However, things went differently: due to his great knowledge of and interest in digital work, our engraving section was automated and it requires an almost full time engagement today. We now engrave on 3 computerized mechanical machines, one laser and we print on sublimation. With the increasing turnover of the engravings we have managed to compensate for the big loss of the shoe repair shop.

Till there, the situation today. Not really rosy. And although you may be a born optimist, you have to stay realist.

For years we talked about the future in the 21st century - now that it's been nearly 2 decades, we realize that there is still a lot of work to push that future in the right direction.

If we look at shoerepairing, the future looks even bleaker.

Colleagues are giving it a tan with bushes and new blood is seeping through only very slowly.

I have just discussed the main reasons: the supply decreases and especially the quality of the shoes on offer drops drastically, as a result of which the beautiful repairs such as new heels or soles lose ground on the sticky and stitching works, which are very labour-intensive but bring very little relief to the cash register.

But we have already talked about that. I would like to look a little further with you: not only the future of the individual shoe repairer is at risk, the whole profession is under great pressure.

Fewer shoe repairers means less sales for the suppliers - they too are finding it more difficult in a smaller market. Fewer shoe repairers are also an emerging problem for shoe manufacturers. Not for the manufacturers of "junk shoes", who do not care about the re-use or repair of shoes. But what about the manufacturers of the quality shoes genre Church, Van Bommel, Ambiorix and many others? Should they not realize that a world without shoe repairers is a serious threat to their production? What is the use of bringing expensive quality shoes on the market if there are no more professionals to carry out even a simple repair? Why buy expensive branded shoes when there is no one left to replace even a heel or re-stitch a simple seam? Since a few years, the contacts between manufacturers and shoe repairers have become closer: in need one knows his friends. But we have to be realistic: we need each other. Every shoe repairer gets much more honour from repairing decent shoes and not every shoe manufacturer of decent shoes works with his own shoe repair service. For example, at Church you can send the shoes to England or at Delvaux - the handbags - you can bring the bags to the dealers. But the prices charged by both companies are very high and the delivery time varies from weeks to months. Not surprisingly, many of their customers come directly to us to repair their shoes or bags. Although they do require the same quality and original materials for a much faster delivery and of course a much lower price.

Many shoe manufacturers have recently opted to contact shoe repairers who provide services to local shoe dealers. Unfortunately, we in the shoe repair sector, have to conclude

that, on the one hand, the number of shoe repairers is dropping alarmingly and, on the other hand, the quality offered by the remaining shoe repairers is no longer up to the required standard. As far as the number is concerned, when I was 18 years old and studied shoe repair in Belgium, I came across a number of 30,000. When we organised a European meeting with our association in 2002 on the occasion of Bruges Cultural European Capital, there were still 10,000. Today we estimate that hardly more than 2,000 colleagues are left. If you bear in mind that most of them are over 50, you have to be an extraordinary optimist to see the future in a positive light. As far as quality is concerned: there is no more inflow and older people hardly ever attend school.

A decade ago, our sector consulted with our Minister of Education to discuss the problem of training in our sector. At that time, no form of training was possible. But after years of negotiations, we achieved a result. We succeeded in starting up an evening course for shoe repairers in two places. This turned out to be a success: all places were immediately taken. It took some effort to find teachers but there was still a form of training. In the meantime, a few years have passed and we see some very motivated young people are breathing new life into the profession, locally. But the road is still a long one to go.

To sum up briefly: our profession is in need and sustainability is at risk in different respect. Economically, shoe repairing, is of lesser importance in the sector and it has a hard time surviving. Socially, older colleagues close their shops while there is no influx of new young professionals. As one of the few people in the sector, I still employ six people. It will not surprise you that, although they are indispensable, they do represent a huge burden on my overall costs. It is very sad that you have to talk about people in terms of "too expensive" and "too heavy a burden on our budget" when they mean so much to you because you enjoy time together and jointly built experience in the daily execution of your craft. Every time I pay my boys at the end of the month, I would not be surprised they would ask for a pay rise. At the same time, if a week later I get the bill of that social security contributions and withholding tax, the sweat of anxiety breaks out.

Where our profession is actually the epitome of sustainability, as we work with natural products and give broken shoes a second life, we have to conclude that the lack of quality silently surrounds us.

I am quickly approaching 60. To be honest, it's still a matter of days.

But that doesn't stop me from accepting work. As a matter of fact, in the next weeks I move our shop in Bruges to a better, both commercially and strategically street. It has a bigger surface and is much easier to reach for customers. So yes, we still have plans and we do believe in the future. And if I talk about future, it is not my future but the future of the profession and the craft, that gave sense to my life and vice versa.