

## **The Komrads story: from canvas shoe to edgy sneaker**

Mark Vandavelde

---

Good morning. First of all, I want to thank you all for showing up – it would be lonely here on stage if you weren't there. Also, thanks to the organization for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to tell the amazing story of Komrads.

Let me introduce myself. My name is Mark Vandavelde. And I will try to explain myself in 3 pictures that reflect who I am.

**Guitar.** Keeps me alive, makes me breathe. I am an undiscovered bathroom singer songwriter. Music for me has a healing power. It often touches me emotionally. I also try to integrate music in the DNA of Komrads.

**My kids.** Maybe not so important for you, but more so for me. Isn't this the reason we all do this?

**A quote** I found years ago in the offices of Facebook: "Done is better than perfect." This is my view on how we should look at business. Especially in retail a lot is changing, it's changing rapidly, and it has a major impact on how we build a relationship with our customers, on our financial results, on the way we operate. Remember Sears, Toys "R" Us, and the list goes on. Nothing is sure anymore, everything goes fast, so you have to learn to fail – and I will mention some failures - to succeed.

So, it all started in 2009.

I was the owner of Content Cowboys, a digital advertising agency in Antwerp. One of our major clients was MTV. One of the proposals was to work with graphical artists and let them be creative on clothes, sneakers, et cetera.

As I was a big fan of the original 0051 (black and white) sneaker, I contacted the distributor of CEBO in Belgium to find out if the all-white 0051 was still produced. Unfortunately, he explained to me that the production of the original CEBO was stopped and that they also would stop distributing the black and white CEBO.

When I drove back to office, I called my business partner at Content Cowboys to tell him that we had to save this legendary sneaker. Initially he thought: "Here we go again, another crazy

idea. It will surely blow over.” But it didn’t. And so we started a sneaker brand within the agency.

The iconic sneaker was introduced in 1951, and became known as ‘0051’ – simple, authentic, vintage. This was done by the USSR as an answer to the American All-star Converse Chuck Taylor

Partizánske was once one of the centers of shoe manufacturing founded by shoe mogul Tomáš Bata. After the Second World War, Bata’s company was nationalized by the communist rulers and transformed into a shoe-making powerhouse, producing up to 30 million shoes per year. But with the end of the USSR and the end of Czech-Slovakia, the shoe business crumbled. And so, when I started with Komrads, knowing nothing of the shoe business, I decided to go back to the roots and I visited what was left of this big industry.

We decided to create a new brand, for the simple reason that ‘CEBO’ was businesswise not possible. It stands for ‘Czech Boot’ and was as a brand not available anymore in Europe.

We wanted to carry the heritage of the original brand, but adapted to the needs of the nowadays customer. As we do believe that customers are not buying products, but they are buying brands. And so Komrads was born: an edgy, streetwise, cult sneaker.

So today I want to focus on how we manage this brand. We work around three pillars covering all the aspects of managing a brand, so not in particular a fashion or shoe brand.

First, our brand and product strategy.

Secondly, our sale strategy.

Thirdly, how I manage the company. I’m a big fan of “The Lean Start-up” by Eric Rise, a book every marketer should know by heart.

Let’s start with the definition of a brand DNA. For instance, take a look at Vans. It started out as a skate brand and still has the perception of a skate brand, but now it also has a very wide distribution in a lot of non-skate shops. The main purpose of having a good brand DNA is consistency in the way your consumers create an image of your brand and your product.

An important part of the definition is 'over time'. This means that your brand DNA should be defined from the beginning as it is very hard and even almost impossible to change the way people look at you.

So what we did within Komrads and Content Cowboys was defining the brand, based upon these six items:

- Product + unique selling proposition (benefits)
- Purpose – the way
- Vision of the future (which is more than just "selling a lot of sneakers")
- Brand values
- Personalities - who you want to target
- Positioning

As I have only 20 minutes, I will take out some of these items to construct the DNA. Let's first focus on the sneaker / product.

To reach our target audience we focused from the start on creating unique and relevant content, if possibly made by our target audience itself. That is why we often work together with young photographers, young models, designers and art-directors, offering them a chance to give their own interpretation to our sneaker, within the DNA of our brand. This often delivers very surprising shots, but always unique and right on content. Just take a look at this video of the shoot of 2017.

Next to our "own" content, we also create a lot of content by supporting artists. We mainly focus on street artist, young musicians and movie makers. This again gives us pretty unique content. Additionally, we use the social networks of those artists to spread our content to their peers.

We closed a deal with the rock band Steak Number Eight, in particular with Cis Deman: not only the guitar player of Steak but also part-time stuntman. They will provide us with videos, songs, lots of material. We are even thinking of creating a Komrads sneaker with Cis.

We use all this content in our customer journey leading to one central point being our website and web shop, with the main purpose to sell Komrads online. As a brand we use all the logical channels to reach out to our target audience, mainly social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, ...) and a monthly newsletter.

Clear key performance indicators / goals:

- Revenue + profit
- Percentage of online sales vs offline
- Percentage of B2C vs B2B
- Total cost of ownership
- Dashboards
- Accurate accountancy