



Matthias Spanke next to one of the "leading actors" at the website www.big-ideas.com, where childlike imagination symbolises the agency's concept. Photo: Andrew Rich

Matthias Spanke

The German discovered early his feeling for creating and designing. As follows, the one-year-trainee became an agency owner for visual merchandising services. In a well made website, the American by choice not only sees a tool for managing ones first impression, but a pattern adaptable for the retail.

Raised in a small town located directly at the Dutch border, the citizen of Nordhorn knew from an early age that he wanted to do something creative professionally. Therefore, he completed his vocational diploma at the Technical College for Design in Osnabruck. "Initially, I attended the College for Design

with the goal of studying communication design. Through my internship in a decoration department of the company Leffers I discovered my passion for visual merchandising. I remained true to this industry to this day", Spanke reveals. It didn't take him long to get a leading position.

At the age of twenty-four the passionate cinemagoer managed the decoration department of the Hamburg retail chain Jean Pascale. This was followed by positions as Head of Visual Merchandising for Tom Tailor, Tally Weijl, Tchibo and recently Macy's in New York City.

Being asked about his move to the United States of America, the visual merchandising expert says: "Two years ago, I decided to move to New York City. There I received an offer from the company Macy's, the world's largest fashion goods retailer, to become their Vice President Creative Director Visual Merchandising. In this role, I was responsible for the visual merchandising concept of their around 600 stores." Therefore he knows very well what distinguishes the European from the US retail. Amongst others the fact that the US has about three to four times as much retail space available. "This makes retail a very competitive market where everyone tries to stand out amongst the crowd. In New York, where everyone seems stressed, is always in a hurry and flooded with visual stimuli, a clear visual concept is extremely important. In New York people know how to extravagantly stage an idea and inspire the customer."

The self-employed is sure: "The display window is and remains to be an important tool for the communication with the customer. It shows the customer on the outside what he can expect in the store or from the brand." And exactly that kind of knowledge is being passed on to the customers of Spanke's agency team of BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising Inc. located in Miami/USA and Berlin/Germany. It seems that it's all in the name. "Regardless of whether it is brand staging or any visual merchandising staging – the focus is always on big ideas. For each concept, you should consider what you want to

stand for, in other words, what the big ideas are. And in order to be successful these must be communicated to the customer as clearly and simply as possible", the creative director sums up what the agency BIG IDEAS stands for. Structure and innovation are mirrored in the website's sitemap. "In today's world, the first step when selecting a service provider is certainly visiting their website. It was important to me to have a clearly structured and easy to navigate website. In addition, the website had to convey a consistent idea. Our concept at www.big-ideas.com shows children that have big ideas and feel like anything is possible."

A guide might be useful to the retail as well. "The requirements are quite clear: the shopping experience in stationary retail must be just as easy as in the online store. In addition, the retail store must use its advantages and create experiences for the customer that the online trade cannot offer in this form. A first step is, for instance, the navigation through the retail store analogue to the website. Because there the customer can easily click through the products. A comparably easy navigation must be created in the store. In addition, it should be a goal to find creative ways of interlinking offline with online." The expert supports the idea of setting a focal point for a 'selfie moment' or using the correct online search terms as window stickers. At BIG IDEAS Visual Merchandising the team takes care of all the details of brand staging in the retail sector. The sections Consulting, Window & In-Store, VM

Directives, Training & Coaching and Recruitment complement the service. And of course they do deal with trends. BIG IDEAS doesn't take up the trends after they are already visible elsewhere. Therefore, the agency defines the visual merchandising trends at least twelve months in advance. "I see trend research as a very important part of my job. Trends, in my opinion, describe the contemporary taste and the consumer behaviour [...]. We observe the developments in the arts, fashion and of course also in film and in music to find out what small trends are becoming big trends and when they are expected to reach their peak."

Geographical freedom is part of the proactive working concept of the independent, too. "Everyone works from where he feels the most comfortable. Therefore, it is not necessary at BIG IDEAS to be permanently present at the locations in Miami or Berlin. We want to ensure that the best people work on our projects, no matter where in the world they happen to be. This also has the advantage that we can use diverse creative influences from everywhere to our advantage. In the beginning, we want to concentrate on the European and American market, hence the two sites." Is this the only reason the former New Yorker has moved to Florida? "I've always wanted to live somewhere, where I have the beach directly in front of my door and, if possible, always good weather. I have fulfilled this dream with my current residence."

Text: Petra Brödner