TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

The APAC partnership that is taking Wilkhahn to new heights.

WORDS JOE MCDONOUGH • IMAGES YEW KWANG

Last November, Jean Paul de la Haye (pictured right) and Adrian Nicolini (pictured p57) walked side by side into Wilkhahn’s annual board meeting in Bad Munder, Germany, ready to present a united vision for the future of the furniture manufacturer. At the time, they held the titles of Director of Sales in Asia and General Manager of Australia and New Zealand respectively. But their proposal was to trade in those positions to be appointed dual managing directors of the combined Asia-Pacific (APAC) unit.
As we have so many competitors, re-establishing that APAC reach was a competitive edge we could not afford to lose.”

“We felt that since we had a common Asia-Pacific border, similar clients, and we already met up once a year as a team to catch up, why wouldn’t we align our targets, budgets and KPIs [profit and loss statements]?” Jean Paul says of the strategy. “We could bring the teams closer together, increase the communication, team spirit and culture, and improve our ability to move faster. It would help us to catch up, why wouldn’t we align our regions and, as we have so many competitors, re-establishing that APAC reach was a competitive edge we could not afford to lose. So it was a natural step to re-merge the two regions under one leadership.”

Dr Jochen Hahne, President, and the executive committee had rubber stamped the joint-leadership arrangement. “We pitched dual leadership because we knew it worked well at other companies,” Jean Paul continues. “Our skill sets complemented each other, considering I had the sales and marketing background and Adrian had the operations and finance experience. But [the higher-ups] wanted a single manager to simplify the chain of command. There was no question it had to be Adrian; he was already general manager of ANZ, had headed our operations in New York, and he had been at the company for 16 years.”

Of course, Jean Paul was not floored by Wilkhahn’s open-mindedness. He saw the company’s flexibility firsthand when it offered him a double promotion in 2012. He jumped from senior project consultant in Singapore to head of the entire Asian operation, skipping a management rung in the process. “Wilkhahn has always been very forward-thinking. It is international but still a medium-sized, family-owned company, so we can act faster than the billion-dollar companies that are restricted by layers.”

Adrian says the transition has been made easier because of their mutual respect. “We have always worked very well together, Jean Paul and I,” he explains. “Plus, we have a common understanding of the objectives of the business, a shared vision, so that has made the development of this plan a lot easier.”

“Jean Paul has been instrumental in setting up a clear plan to ensure we remain a highly profitable business.” It helps that they very rarely have conflicting views on strategy. “We are almost always on the same page,” Jean Paul reveals. “But if one of us says we are not sure, for whatever reason, then we’ll find a compromise. As I said, we have different strengths and that is why we work so well together. Even though Adrian is the number one in the region, he treats me like his peer. There are no egos; it is about what is best for the company.”

“At Pelle Leathers, quality and service are paramount. We are partnered with Europe’s leading tanneries in Germany and Italy to offer a superior leather range in a wide palette of colours. Utilising the latest technology, our partners only use the finest EUROPEAN raw material, enabling us to bring you larger hides with greater thickness; providing higher quality and yield as well as greater stability on public seating. We are the only leather company in Australia / NZ to have eco-labelled leather, having achieved GreenTag Certification GreenRate level B. Pelle Leathers has been a supplier partner of Wilkhahn Asia-Pacific for the past 14 years. We pride ourselves in the utmost highest level of quality, service and professionalism which translates into a natural synergy with such a highly professional, world-renowned and quality international company as Wilkhahn.”

– Andrew Spanswick, Owner, Pelle Leathers

Jean Paul continued. “Our skill sets complemented each other, considering I had the sales and marketing background and Adrian had the operations and finance experience. But [the higher-ups] wanted a single manager to simplify the chain of command. There was no question it had to be Adrian; he was already general manager of ANZ, had headed our operations in New York, and he had been at the company for 16 years.”

Pelle Leathers has been a supplier partner of Wilkhahn Asia-Pacific for the past 14 years. We pride ourselves in the utmost highest level of quality, service and professionalism which translates into a natural synergy with such a highly professional, world-renowned and quality international company as Wilkhahn.”

– Andrew Spanswick, Owner, Pelle Leathers

Jean Paul had experienced the APAC business model before Wilkhahn split it into ANZ and Asia, so he knew it was important to revert to the company’s former structure. “It was initially one region under one leadership before the managing director departed and the leadership was divided between Jean Paul and I over the two regions. We both saw how effective it had been under the one leadership. There is plenty of fluidity between the two regions and, as we have so many competitors, re-establishing that APAC reach was a competitive edge we could not afford to lose. So it was a natural step to re-merge the regions under one leadership.”

Jean Paul continues. “Our skill sets complemented each other, considering I had the sales and marketing background and Adrian had the operations and finance experience. But [the higher-ups] wanted a single manager to simplify the chain of command. There was no question it had to be Adrian; he was already general manager of ANZ, had headed our operations in New York, and he had been at the company for 16 years.”

Of course, Jean Paul was not floored by Wilkhahn’s open-mindedness. He saw the company’s flexibility firsthand when it offered him a double promotion in 2012. He jumped from senior project consultant in Singapore to head of the entire Asian operation, skipping a management rung in the process. “Wilkhahn has always been very forward-thinking. It is international but still a medium-sized, family-owned company, so we can act faster than the billion-dollar companies that are restricted by layers.”

Adrian says the transition has been made easier because of their mutual respect. “We have always worked very well together, Jean Paul and I,” he explains. “Plus, we have a common understanding of the objectives of the business, a shared vision, so that has made the development of this plan a lot easier.”

“Jean Paul has done a wonderful job building the business in Asia over many years. He has produced solid year-on-year growth, and now we are leveraging that in Australia.”

“It has been almost a year now in our new roles and it is going exceptionally well. The same team that was reporting to me when I was general manager of ANZ are now reporting to Jean Paul, and they are learning a lot from him. It is great that we can have this consolidated leadership in our sales and marketing across APAC.”

With Wilkhahn’s APAC base to remain in Sydney, the company is moving to a plush new showroom of its own design in Surry Hills, and has invested in a new manufacturing facility too. “It is an exciting new chapter for the business and, with the two relocations, it has taken a significant amount of time. All the while, we have been working at a strategic level to develop a medium-term plan for the business across APAC,” Adrian explains.

“Jean Paul has been instrumental in setting up a clear plan to ensure we remain a highly profitable business.” It helps that they very rarely have conflicting views on strategy. “We are almost always on the same page,” Jean Paul reveals. “But if one of us says we are not sure, for whatever reason, then we’ll find a compromise. As I said, we have different strengths and that is why we work so well together. Even though Adrian is the number one in the region, he treats me like his peer. There are no egos; it is about what is best for the company.”