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SUPPORTING MIGRANT FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS



xoberlin Case Study

The basics of entrepreneurship



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INTRODUCTION

Name Leonor von Salisch
Company xoberlin
Website www.xoberlin.de
Description of business Creation of photo and video campaigns for sustainable labels



Leonor, originally from Amsterdam in the Netherlands, lives in Berlin in Germany since approximately 10 years. Three and a half years ago she started her own business, it's called xoberlin. It is a creative agency where she produces beautiful photo and video campaigns for sustainable brands. She loves to take a camera in her hand and to shoot lovely photography and videography work with stories that also support visions for sustainable brands.

THE BASICS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

What does Entrepreneurship mean?

“For me entrepreneurship means actually to bring an idea to life. If you have an idea or something you really want to put into the world and really make it happen with all possible effort.” Only if you manage to somehow realize your idea then you are satisfied. She thinks this also goes along with entrepreneurship - that it is something you really get satisfaction by. Whether it is a personal service or product does not matter, what counts is passion. Leonor has a very holistic entrepreneurship approach. Lots of starters have their main focus on making money. Although, of course, money is very important, for example to make the business grow, it is not Leonor’s focal point. Her work also goes along with a lot of passion. She managed to generate her work and income out of her hobby and joy. So, entrepreneurship melts into more layers of her life. She does not see her business separate from her personal life – it is more this holistic approach of entrepreneurship.

The most important core competencies

As an entrepreneur you need certain core competencies. Leonor considers the following competencies particularly important in the process of being an entrepreneur:

- You should be able to push yourself to go for 1000 percent instead of being satisfied with 100 percent if you deliver something or if you want to put something in the world.
- Also very important is being persistent and not giving up too soon because there will be a lot of burdens which you have to handle. If you have an own business it is always about being on the look-out for new opportunities and improvements. Especially the circumstances caused by Covid19 require that. Many projects do not work out as planned, were cancelled or put on hold. She is still moving on, finding ways to deal with the situation and not giving up.
- Another important competence is to learn and reflect from failures and mistakes, to take everything that happens seriously and be able to reflect on the situation. It also helps you to be open-minded and to broaden your horizon in your process of being an entrepreneur.

- You should also be very studious and willing to learn. If there is a problem or something you do not understand you need the will to understand it, to search for solutions and to solve the problem. There are a lot of people who tend to lean back if something is not working out or they push it off saying that it is not their expertise, they do not know how to manage or that they are not responsible. But as an entrepreneur you are responsible for the whole business. So if there is a problem you have to solve it. And it is not a bad thing to solve problems. Quite the contrary: Often it is very satisfying if you are able to solve problems. “So I always see burdens and problems also as a challenge. Maybe somehow it is a proof to myself if I am able to solve it. But I don’t see it as an option at all to just lean back and wait till it solves itself.”
- Having confidence and trust in the process is another competence Leonor considers importantly. Many things will never work out the way you planned them, even if you write a perfect business plan or if you have a perfect schedule for the week, things just happen in between. And things change, get cancelled, remixed, and done totally different and so it demands a lot of confidence and trust that nevertheless, the business will work out.
- As an entrepreneur, flexibility is an important requirement. It is like you are surfing with the waves of this process of being an entrepreneur. Managing with clients, managing with other creatives, managing with yourself. Maybe there are some days when you actually do not feel good - then be kind to yourself and maybe lay back and rest for a day. “Many entrepreneurs who I know put the expectations on themselves so high that they never rest and even if they are sick, they still work. But it is really important at these days, I taught myself, to stop and put the laptop down, lay back and have a rest.”
- There are also many interpersonal skills that are really important. For example, always showing honest interest in relations and one's network as well as being reliable and loyal to the people you work with. Of course, the goal is that your clients want to work with you. As soon as you start to be dishonest or non-transparent, they will feel it and this also effects your work relation and outcome for both parties.

Relevant business skills

In order to be a successful entrepreneur, you should also have some basic business skills. Leonor points out a variety of important competences in the field of business:

- It is definitely of advantage if you have a sense for what the market needs in order to find your niche.
- “No fear of trial and error.” Especially in the beginning, if you want to put something in the world, there will be a lot of trial and error since everything is new for you. So many people have great ideas, but they are scared to realize them. Leonor advises not to be scared, to just try it and to put your idea out there.
- Many people who start a business think too big from the beginning. For Leonor it was (and still is) very helpful to break the goals and visions down in milestones. For her, it was better to start slowly and to avoid making it too big from the beginning because very ambitious targets can scare yourself, and sometimes they are not realistic either. Of course, you want to dream and think big and need this spot on the horizon where you want to grow towards. But you should find the right balance between those big dreams and realistic goals.
- Sales and negotiating skills are some of the most important as well as the most challenging skills you need as an entrepreneur.

How xoberlin came about

Leonor studied communications science, where she also did a minor entrepreneurship. So she learned lot of the basics of being an entrepreneur very early on her career path. After her studies she worked for two years in a marketing agency and figured that it is not always efficient how processes were going because of many hierarchies. There were huge budgets for sometimes not even a beautiful outcome. Those big budgets did not guarantee good content. So why not cutting down the hierarchies and producing beautiful campaigns smartly and in-house? So, being a creative agency and a production house in one, so that it is more like a lean team. Leonor now works with different creatives where needed, depending on the project. They are not employed by her but she books them as freelancer. So she can be very flexible, does not need to rent an expensive office or pay salaries each month for a fix amount of employees. It is a new

way of working and setting up businesses nowadays.

Her focus on sustainability she found while she was working as a fashion stylist and got confronted with the downside of the fashion industry. She had to work with so many clothes, like piles of clothing, and recognized that often the quality is not related to the price - high price does not mean good quality. That inspired her to deal with the topics quality and sustainability. She felt that the fashion industry needs a transformation and wanted to contribute to this transformation. Leonor's background in communication, science and marketing helped her to recognize the need for smartly produced sustainable content with less hierarchies. With her interest and expertise, she found a way to support the sustainable brands and thus make a contribution to the shift of the fashion industry to a sustainable direction.

Most of the sustainable fashion labels are small brands that often do not have the financial capacity to hire a creative agency and a big production company. However, they still have to compete with the not sustainable fashion brands and need good content, but it is not possible if it is so expensive. Leonor realized that the way beautiful content in high quality can be shot nowadays is way more effective than it used to be some years ago. There are better cameras in smaller sizes, for example, and the accessibility for technology has shifted as well. That is how Leonor found the market gap and her niche: with *xoberlin*, which she founded in 2017, she makes smartly produced photo and video campaigns affordable to her target group, the smaller sustainable brands.

The hardest challenges: Sales and negotiation

To get the jobs on board was one of the biggest challenges Leonor faced. With the help of her boyfriend, who also is an entrepreneur, she learned how to build a deeper relationship with potential clients in order to overcome this. In the beginning, she wanted to draw a really clear line between friends and business partners. Now, she also becomes friends with her clients somehow, which does not mean that it has to be super personal. You can go out for a drink or dinner or visit an event together. It is about socializing ways of being in touch, get to know each other in order to find a pleasant basis for the work relation so that you really want to work with each other.

What also helped Leonor to overcome the sales challenge was to trust the process. As long as you are confident in your product and talk about it very openly and honestly to people, at one point there are people who resonate with you and who want to buy your product. So that is what actually happened: Leonor was not pushing or forcing it. She had her website and her product portfolio, and then it started to roll.

As an entrepreneur, you cannot avoid negotiation – that part is also a very challenging one for Leonor. For her, it can be really annoying to talk to the client about budget and negotiate while being the content creator at the same time. That is why she sometimes hire someone like an accountant to make the deals. In general, talking about money and arranging a fair price is a big obstacle. "It is really awkward if the expectations are not similar as the client actually has half of the price in mind. And of course, in the early years, you still do it for the small price. But it feels very bad afterwards because you don't want to be for sale, you know? So it's super hard to develop a thick skin, to say no to a lot of projects and also to stay strong and confident." What Leonor had to learn first is that time is money. If the client is not willing to pay your time, then you can better put your time in other projects. But instead of trying to please clients it is stronger to say no. And maybe they come back later, because then they might have adapted their budget and have the financial capacity.

Although Leonor has her own business for some years now, she considers sales and negotiation as the hardest parts in the business. However, those challenges allow her to grow and develop continuously.

Enriched by carrying two cultures in her heart

After a not always easy childhood, in which she was often bullied for being half-German and had to listen to World War II jokes, she now finds it enriching to carry both cultures within herself. "Growing up with two cultures and languages is such an enrichment because you have a broader horizon, and that applies to all situations in life. It feels good to be able to immerse yourself in both cultures." Since living in Germany, she also feels that her second identity is valued. For her, it seems that Germans romanticize the Netherlands and that they have a lot of positive prejudices towards the country.

Leonor works with clients in both countries, which allows her to take full advantage of her bilingualism. The Dutch are said to be very open and so is Leonor: a curious and open-minded woman who is not afraid to approach people, ask others for help or share her creative ideas. This attribute helped her helped her to understand structures in a new society and paved the way for her entrepreneurial activities.

Leonors advice for other female entrepreneurs

"If an idea sparks you or if there is an idea you are really inspired by, don't be afraid to put it into the world, because if you are inspired by the idea and share it with the world, people will see it and see it as an authenticity. They will be willing to help, will be willing to listen and will be willing to support. Take your time, don't rush it. Embrace the process and just do it. It's so fun."