Schmidt Groupe
The industrial artisan - dedicated to the art of living
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The world is changing. Saying that is nothing new. But noticing and feeling it, experiencing it in one’s daily life, at home and at work, brings in a totally different dimension. That’s why it seemed essential for me to take the time to retrace the adventure of the Schmidt family group and make it into a book.

The world is undergoing change and we too are changing, without in any way modifying what has constituted the strength and singularity of our firm and forged its identity over time. We were Schmidt, then SALM (Société Alsacienne de Meubles), from now on we are Schmidt Groupe.

By taking on again the name of its founder, our family enterprise proudly asserts the first of its values: its confidence in what is human. Schmidt Groupe is no mere corporate name. Schmidt Groupe is a team, composed of men and women who work day by day developing the firm and contributing to its expansion with daring, innovation and creativity.

The world is changing and the firm is expanding. It is currently reaching a turning point. From its international dimension, it is moving on to becoming globalized.

Digitalization has completely changed the relationship between dealers and consumers. The teams are being renewed, long-standing colleagues are leaving; a new generation is joining us. We’re becoming acquainted with a host of young people who are arriving to take over, to share our ambitions and objectives, bringing with them their skills, their vision and their added value. It is they who will write further chapters of our story.

But nothing can be written without memory. It is up to us to pass on the philosophy and the basic principles on which our predecessors built the enterprise, principles which are indeed values that we endeavour to keep alive and strong. If we wish to become by 2025 the Group providing consumers with their favourite brands of bespoke home furnishing, the idea of an extended enterprise has to be assimilated. Our “raison d’être” is first and foremost to contribute to pleasure and well-being, both as regards consumers’ living styles and the way all our teams live harmoniously together. The whole meaning of our work is that: placing the consumer at the heart of our concerns. It is in order better to approach the future that I wish to draw lessons from the past. And to capitalize on know-how, what better method than making it known?

Anne Leitzgen
Winning over consumers

The sun is bursting over the port of Marseilles. The imposing cruise liner waits at the quayside. Boarding passengers joyfully greet each other along the gangways: “Ah, you’re here, too!” Concessionaire shop managers, salesmen, marketing staff, network organizers and managerial staff have arrived from all the regions and all the countries to attend Euroforum, Schmidt Groupe’s grand get-together.

The liner will make three return trips between Marseilles and Genoa to transport close on 3000 participants. A very full programme awaits them: presentation of the aims and innovations, new sales-outlet concepts, an exhibition of new product ranges covering three floors in Genoa, and, finally, the screening of upcoming publicity campaigns.

It is a strategic get-together for the group, the highpoint being exchanging views, listening to one another, but also the accompaniment of the networks and the discovery of the products.

In the evening things are more relaxed. The Catalans set the stage on fire, with the guys from Castres not far behind them; the whole deck is invaded by a bunch of pirates.

“‘We are an Armada, a conquering Armada launching out to capture the heart of consumers’,” cries out Anne Leitzgen on the stage of the floating theatre, as the liner casts off.
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Hubert Schmidt, at age 27, sets up his masonry firm in Türkismühle (Saarland).

From the private turnkey house to the first Schmidt Küchen cabinets: the first manufacturing hall for kitchen cabinets is built and the first models are presented at the St Wendel Trade-Fair (Saarland).

Saarland reintegrates Germany. On 6th July, Cuisines Schmidt is established in Liépvre and manufactures Heidi dressers. With 4 salesmen, 57 employees – of whom 20 or so come from Saarland. The firm already has a turnover of 300,000 Euros.

Karl Leitzgen marries Antonia Schmidt and gives an incredible boost to the Cuisines Schmidt firm in Liépvre. 100 collaborators and a turnover close on 1 million Euros.

Kitchen cabinets are no longer in fashion. Cuisines Schmidt take a different approach and launch kitchen units; the first catalogue illustrating the Standard, Prestige and Classic ranges, goes to press. The bespoke facing process is under way. 150 collaborators and a turnover of more than 5 million Euros.

On 13th July, the last Prestige 150 cabinet is manufactured. With the arrival of the first digital order, the firm becomes the Société Alsacienne de Meubles - SALM. It totals 270 employees and posts a turnover of 19 million Euros.

Over 80 years of a family and industrial adventure
To step up sales in its exclusive outlets, Cuisines Schmidt enters the realm of publicity and opens shops in the UK. “Be the best, respect everyone, succeed together” are the keywords of the group’s philosophy.

350 employees; a turnover of 44 million Euros.

SALM launches its brand name “Cuisines Schmidt” in Paris and becomes the second French group. A new modern factory is opened in Sélestat and the Türkismühle site is joined to France. 600 employees and a turnover of 65 million Euros.

Death of Hubert Schmidt and creation of a sales agency in Scandinavia. 650 employees and turnover of 77 million Euros.

The SALM group widens its scope and launches “Cuisinella”: a new, more affordable, brand for young couples. Meanwhile Cuisines Schmidt enters the realm of bathrooms and accessories. 700 employees with a turnover of 83 million Euros.

Karl Leitzen suddenly and brutally dies. His wife, Antonia, takes over the management aided by Jean-Marie Schwab. Schmidt offers a free choice of colours, styles and multiple combinations. Bespoke manufacturing becomes industrialized. 800 employees and a turnover of 94 million Euros.

SALM is the first French kitchen manufacturer to be awarded the ISO 9001 quality certification. The group pursues its diversification and sets up a subsidiary producing kit furniture, EMK, for mass-market retailing. 750 employees, the firm reaches a turnover of 123.5 million Euros.
The Sélestat plant is expanded. With new custom-manufacturing, finishing and profiling lines in Türkismühle, SALM launches a range of bespoke furniture and storage spaces totally adapted to individual consumer needs. Schmidt pursues the development of its exports. 1,200 employees and a turnover of 200 million Euros.

Anne Leitzgen takes over the chairing of the family group; she reinforces the network of exclusive outlets and endeavours to take a first turning: to become the leading European firm and expand it into an international group. 1,300 employees and a turnover of 295 million Euros.

SALM takes pride in obtaining three certifications (Quality, Environment and Hygiene), a ‘first’ among kitchen manufacturers. The firm starts up its new, totally automated, U2 production site in Sélestat. The group becomes the № 1 French kitchen manufacturer. 1,420 employees and a turnover of 304 million Euros.

Schmidt is present in 25 countries. Thanks to its policy of sustainable development, the group obtains a further eco label. 1,444 employees and a 332 million Euro turnover.

SALM opens a factory in China by signing a joint-venture agreement with the S.S.K. which already has a network of 1,200 furniture outlets. Two new Schmidt outlet concepts in Europe: Schmidt Home Stories and Schmidt Cupboards and bespoke furniture. With 1,400 employees and 6,000 collaborators throughout the world, the Group achieves a turnover close on 400 million Euros.

SALM becomes Schmidt Groupe. By taking back the name of its founder, the Group proudly asserts its faith in what is human. The consumer is at the heart of the concerns of the extended Enterprise with the final aim of delighting every client. The Excellence Warranty contract is launched. 1,500 employees, 7,500 collaborators throughout the world and a turnover of 460 million Euros, 15% of which comes from international sources.
Once upon a time, a young man bursting with energy and ambition wanted to become somebody. Hubert Schmidt lost his father when he was four and, as he grew up, he decided not to work on the family’s farm. Being manually very gifted, he trained as a mason plasterer and did his best to master the trade.

At 27, he set up his own small masonry firm. Being a hard worker, he quickly moved on from building houses to making traditional kitchen cabinets and then on to the industrial manufacturing of kitchen units.

This exciting adventure began in 1934 and goes on today expanding and transforming. Over 80 years, the firm has undergone many fresh developments, been spurred on by remarkable figures, taken daring bets, encountered setbacks and successes… It has indeed come a long way!

The story of Schmidt Groupe is one of those moving epics because it is so human. It is out of the question for this discreet firm to let the personalities of its managers overshadow those of the women and men who, with their skills, worked to raise their Group up to become the fifth largest kitchen manufacturer in Europe and the first in France.

Of course, this story did not just happen on its own. Starting out from a small masonry workshop in Türkismühle to becoming a leading industrial group catering to made-to-measure lifestyles, manufacturing in France and Germany as well as conquering the huge market in China, constantly developing its brands and running huge publicity campaigns – all this could not have been simply decreed with a snap of the fingers.

As the economist Keynes said: “You can’t beat the market.” Such is the whole point of the development of our Group geared to meet the expectations of consumers and all those who have chosen to live their daily lives in Schmidt and Cuisinella environments.

Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to shape the prime elements of what brings men and women together since the dawn of humanity: home sweet home, where all of us eat and drink, of course to survive, but also where the various cultures of the world develop, become refined and are passed on.

In the beginning was the Word, but Food was just as essential.
Kitchen, cooks, cookery, kitchen-builders, « kitchen sink theatre », « kitchen councils » « cooking the books » « too many cooks spoil the broth », « to cook someone’s goose »: the wealth of idioms, turns of phrase and expressions demonstrates the central function of the kitchen and « the eating room » in the life of Mankind.

Over time things have changed a lot.
Schmidt Groupe knows and implements better than anyone the idea that from now on cooking will be digital or die away.

Our distant prehistoric ancestors wandering around the planet took many big steps for humanity, among the most important of which was the taming of fire. First used to keep people warm and ward off predators, fire only gradually moved in to cook food. The caveman genius who first had the idea of eating hot food and winning over his companions to imitate him did not leave his name for posterity, but our human race is deeply indebted to him. This way of eating not only contributed to enhancing taste but also ensured survival by killing off parasites and making food healthier.

Having paid this tribute, let us now gaily jump over several thousands of years. The Romans were the first in the world to set the kitchen (culina in Latin) apart in the household. Among the “others” (whom the Romans called « barbarians »), the chimney was completely unknown; people crammed together in a single one-storey room with a high ceiling. Part of the smoke from the fire would escape through a hole made in the roof but the rest would create a smothering haze for the occupants. This rudimentary type of dwelling lasted until the Middle-Ages in the greater part of the western world.

But let’s move on in time. The single open room with the fire was gradually closed in, becoming a separate part where few entered. In upper-class homes, it became the servants’ domain where the mistress of the house would occasionally come to give her orders. Architecturally, the kitchen was set apart. Not in all classes of society though, for the poorest people still have only one room to live in. But little by little, the kitchen found its place and thereby established its pedigree.

Over a long period, in bigger homes the distance between the kitchen and the dining room was such that the chief concern of the diners was to get their meals served hot! This inconvenience was remedied at the end of the Renaissance with the invention of the dish-warmer. However, in many countries kitchens remained ill-ventilated and dark, notably in England owing to a prohibitive tax on the number of windows…

Other innovations were brought into kitchens. The tall flames from the roasting hearth disappeared with the first cookers and their small gas-rings. These cast-iron stoves were initially manufactured by artisans and then, after the Industrial Revolution, in factories. Wood fuel was replaced by coal, itself later to give way to gas, thus definitively taming the flames. All this before the introduction at what we now take for granted: electric hotplates, microwaves, induction and the thousand-and-one technological improvements brought about at the end of the 20th century and perfectly mastered by Schmidt Groupe. From now on cooking will be digital or die away.
But let’s not anticipate… For centuries, the kitchen remained a hidden space, a room apart. In small flats, meals would be served there, but as soon as lifestyles went up, dining rooms appeared. The image of the cook carrying the steaming tureen onto the laid table has become a great classic.

And a separate room naturally makes one imagine specific furniture. But that was far off! In middle-class homes, the kitchen doubled, even trebled, in size with a scullery, a pantry and a coal store. The furniture was as simple as could be: wooden chests and shelves, sheltered from the air and light… Only the table stayed on and was used as what was yet to be called a worktop. The dishes were stacked on a sideboard, sometimes imposingly installed in the dining room. As for the sink, it was usually hidden away in a room at the back, in the laundry, and only appeared in the kitchen itself with the installation of tap water. Most homes in the past had a mere tub or a basin.

Everything moved on with standardization and comfort accessible to all. Even so, the kitchen remained a secluded area.

The first piece of furniture truly designed for the «eating room» was an icebox – before the invention of the refrigerator. In 1844, “frozen” cargo arriving from the USA created quite a stir in England. Since cold could now travel thanks to relatively speedy haulage, it could enter into peoples’ daily lives. Special cupboards for preserving foodstuff were built into kitchens.

All that was needed was blocks of ice that could be bought on the market and used for storing fresh food – a child’s game! Tin cans came in soon after making everything that much more convenient. The culinary revolution had begun.

Ovens and cold stores were soon to become no longer exceptional luxuries but everyday objects. All the more since a few years earlier, towards the end of the 18th century, an Englishman had had the brilliant idea of mass-producing kitchen furniture: no longer any need to build individual pieces but simply manufacture the same chests, chairs and tables for the majority of people. Everything was handmade in workshops and the pieces manufactured had simply to be assembled. With the appearance of machine tools, the era of standardization had opened. Kitchen cabinets could arrive on the scene.
In the Renaissance, refined crockery and cutlery were neatly tidied away in a ‘dresser’. Enamoured of gracefulness and functionality, the 18th century gave up the classical all-purpose sideboard, preferring specific pieces of furniture for each use (dressers and credenzas). But the dresser came back with a vengeance under the reign of Napoleon III, mass-produced by the chisels of Art-Nouveau cabinetmakers who designed furniture sets adapted to the specific use made of each room in the house. Sideboards varied with fashion and epochs.

They usually consisted of a double-door cupboard, topped by a shelf where you could put whatever you wish. Above that was another cupboard, embellished with doors and often glass panes. Souvenir postcards were slipped onto the glass panes, a seashell and trinkets nestled in the open space, which could also be used for storing plates and table-mats according to taste... Not to be forgotten were the two drawers filled with napkins and cutlery. This sideboard, both aesthetic and functional, was designed for the dining room and it was to remain there for a long time...

Then came the whirlwind of modern life and progress... The great fitted kitchens, self-standing or fixed to the wall, which appeared during the boom following World War II, tolled the knell for the traditional sideboard. A picture remains in many of our memories of this piece of furniture covered in yellow, blue or green Formica and the characteristic noise of its metal snap-lock.
However, a new invention was to chase the dresser out of the dining-room and render it obsolete: the television set, the new house-cricket.

Years go by but certain habits remain and even, one might say, become embedded: the kitchen becomes the room in the home where people gather, not only to prepare meals, but to chat, have a coffee, to smell and taste... People also listen to the radio there, miniaturization having made radio sets, the famous transistors, that much more portable. But new competition was threatening the scene: television was beginning to spread, and what could be more maddening than to miss one’s favourite programme because the dinner bell had rung and the mistress of the house had called out: « grub up! »?

The TV cult was born in the USA. Pragmatic Americans decreed that if television was not for the kitchen, then the kitchen had to be in front of the TV set. All that was needed was to dismantle the partitions! And thus gradually the idea of an open kitchen came about, got accepted and took over.

The bar followed close on its heels. Then, the fitted kitchen, more practical and capable of integrating new appliances: the washing machine, the microwave, the freezer... This trend rapidly spread over all western countries, with, nevertheless, some distinctive features: the Italians don’t have a draining board beside their sink, but a draining counter installed above it. A detail, but in Italy all manufacturers offer it. This brings us to the expectations of the modern customer: made-to-measure yes, but similarity, no. That’s why it’s part of Schmidt Groupe’s creed.

Uniformity breeds boredom: it is said. And that’s why Schmidt Groupe’s adventure, and that of all its men and women, is anything but boring. Follow the guide!
Exit the little station; go to the end of the street, turn left, and carry straight on. After a few minutes, factory buildings appear on your right, then a brand new « Schmidt Küchen » showroom. Enter the courtyard, walk along the big wall-panel decorating the frontage, and there, Caroline Leitzgen, granddaughter of the founder and now Schmidt marketing manager for Germany as well as the Group’s associate general manager, calls out with a wide smile: « You are on the exact spot where it all began! »
It’s a small town in Saarland, quite close to France, and of those places quickly driven through. Life here seems pleasant with the neat houses and the inhabitants who courteously greet you. In 1934, it must have been much the same, a shade more rural perhaps.

That year, a young couple, who had married on 2nd January – in spite of the hesitations of the young bride’s family who were reluctant to have a son-in-law without a stable job – had just settled in. He was called Hubert and she, Antonia; he was 27 and she’d just turned 23. Hubert and Antonia Schmidt both originated in the village of Schwarzenbach, some nine kilometres from Türkismühle.

His parents, Ludwig and Maria Schmidt, were small farmers. The father died too young, leaving his wife to look after a numerous family and the farm as best she could.

But the tight situation of the Schmidts proved to be an incentive for everyone to earn an honourable living. Hubert, hardworking and manually gifted, trained in masonry and soon decided to launch out and become his own boss. Antonia, his wife, the daughter of a civil servant, looked after the books while he exploited his talents as a mason-cum-plasterer. Success came fast. Hubert was a convivial salesman and an excellent technician. He very soon became no longer satisfied with simply building dwellings.

The Türkismühle plant in the 1930’s

Hubert (1907-1990), the son of Ludwig and Maria Schmidt, was born on 3rd August in Schwarzenbach. Antonia (1911-2003), the daughter of Michel and Katarina Kaufmann, on 13th February 1911, in the same village. He, with six siblings, was an orphan; she, with seven siblings, the daughter of a forest warden.

Together they were to have three daughters: Adelheid (1934-2013), Antonia (born 1st November, 1936) and Hilde (born 1939).

The second, Antonia, married Karl Leitzgen (1936-1995), the future CEO of Schmid, in 1967. The couple had two daughters, Caroline (born 14th March 1972) and Anne (born 18th September 1973). Caroline and Anne followed in the footsteps of their mother pursuing the work of their father, Karl, and their grandfather, Hubert.
At almost 80 years of age, Antonia Leitzgen (née Schmidt), has lost none of her dynamism nor her authority. Spruce, still keenly interested in sports cars, and overflowing with affection for her granddaughters, she lives in her house at Lièpvre. It’s a beautiful residence with a Mansart style roof and triangular pediments emblematic of 18th century architecture. Antonia Leitzgen remembers the work and success her father, Hubert. Having grown up with the enterprise, she is the family’s memory. With a smile Antonia explains “Business was flourishing. When my father bought his first car, my grandmother, Maria, was almost ashamed to see her son at the wheel of the sole car in Türkismühle...”

Back in Germany, it was his wife, Antonia who was managing the business: - My mother had to undergo major surgery to remove a kidney. My uncle and a governess looked after us and the firm. Once back in civvy street, Hubert Schmidt encountered new challenges. After five years of war the country had to be rebuilt, needs were enormous. Being recognized as a good artisan, he conceived the idea of proposing turnkey houses and he immediately found buyers. He quickly expanded his business and looked on dozens of workers. He was contracted to build blocks of flats and administrative buildings, moving from one worksite to the next.

Hubert Schmidt gathered around him good qualified workers, tile setters, electricians and carpenters. He knew every trick of the building trade.

One day, a customer of his made him a suggestion: - Since you have such competent artisans, why don’t you start making kitchen furniture? Cabinets are all the thing, you know... It did not take him long to recognize the advantage of such a move; manufacturing furniture required many fewer skills and fewer administrative constraints than those involved in building houses. Furthermore the market was immense, for a huge number of German homes needed re-equipping.

- Ten cabinets, then 20, then 50 and so it went on...he built the first for our own home, drawing up the plans himself. In this way, little by little, he reduced his building activities to launch into kitchen cabinets... and it was an immediate success, his daughter, Antonia recalls.

In 1946, the activity rose onto an industrial scale; the first factory was built, then a second, in 1950. Hubert Schmidt became a well-known figure, a prominent industrialist and a town-councillor to boot.

Then, just when everything was beginning to take shape, a catastrophe occurred: Two fires in quick succession devastated the factory production hall, the offices and the warehouse. Several years of hard work went up smoke.

- My parents were convinced it was a criminal act; my father had seen the silhouette of a man lurking around the buildings on the evening of the second fire. But we never knew who it was. Whether it was criminal or not, other people would have been disheartened. Not so Hubert Schmidt, who immediately got back to work embodying to the letter the words of Kipling’s poem: “You’ll be a Man, my son!” If you can watch the things you gave your life to, broken, And stoop and build ’em up... and start again at your beginnings.”

Two years of uncertainty before the machine could be got under way again then rapidly develop. In a short time many events were going to take place over the border.
Ten of them sitting round a big round table in Türkismühle. With a grin, Caroline Leitzgen nicknames them the “dinosaurs”. There’s Gernot Klee, who joined as an apprentice in 1951, the three Stephan brothers, Hans-Jürgen, Dieter and Horst, together totalling 134 years of service in the company, Ulrike Hares, Elfi Molter, Anita Deßbesell, the accountant who speaks movingly of “grandfather”, Jürgen Fries, who built a hunting watch for Herr Schmidt, Eberhard Thies, and Hubertus Kirchen, the most talkative, understandably so because he was Schmidt Kitchens exclusive travelling sales representative.

All of them speak with passion about the firm they saw grow and evolve and all remember the strong personality of Hubert Schmidt, “Herr Schmidt” or “der Chef”. On one side, Gernot Klee shares stories with his neighbours about his beginnings, while Hubertus recalls the loading of the vans prior to deliveries…

The first cabinets were presented at the Saint Wendel trade-fair in Saarland. It was in 1948 - Hubertus Kirchen, a cousin of Antonia Leitzgen, remembers: I arrived in Liépvre in January 1959 to replace the sales-technician who was retiring. I made my first sale, a Heidi kitchen cabinet, on 6th July 1959. I rediscovered it a few years later and bought it back to give to Mrs Leitzgen. Now, it stands alongside other old cabinets we found here and there and display in the Studio at Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines: it’s become a sort of relic…

The French market was within close reach, a few kilometres away, and it, too, was crying out for kitchen cabinets.

Buoyed along by the economic revival after World War II, French families went in for modern installations with huge, roomy kitchen cabinets. It was a godsend for Schmidt, whose firm, being in Saarland – then under French administration – was exempt from customs duties and excessive taxes and all the time-consuming formalities.

Hubert Schmidt began supplying eastern, then northern France with his delivery vans, marked “Cuisines Schmidt - Buffets de cuisine” (Schmidt Kitchens – Kitchen Cabinets”), recognizable from afar.

Success had been achieved but politics would change things.

On 6th July 1959, a frontier appeared between the enterprise and its French market. - We had to fill out lots of papers for customs clearance: a time-consuming, complicated and expensive process, Anita Deßbesell recalls.

Tired of all the red tape, Hubert Schmidt decided to circumvent the obstacle by setting up a factory over the border. But where? In Bitche? In Metz? No! Neither of these towns! The choice fell upon Liépvre.
Hubert Schmidt told me: I want you to take over the sale of cabinets in France. That was in 1961.

He would also look after the Schmidt stall at the Paris Furniture Trade-fair, at the Porte de Versailles, together with Hubert Schmidt and the three other sales representatives.

This event, an unequalled ‘must’ in the furniture world, was held each year over ten days at the end of January. It was a true ‘institution’.

Schmidt representatives sold their models to furniture traders, carpenters, and mass-market furniture stores. They took care to prepare their arrival by informing these ‘customers’ by mail of their presence at the trade-fair and inviting them to meet at their stall where six to eight kitchen-cabinets were on display.
Every morning, around 5am, Mr Schmidt would go out hunting. He’d be back by 8am, don his suit and be at the factory at 8.30 immediately to start reading his mail while checking the arrival of his staff. That was the way his day began. Such is the memory of Anita Deßbesell, an accountant who joined the company in 1963.

Two passions, two worlds: hunting and business. All those who knew Hubert Schmidt remember an upright man, in appearance stern, but deeply human.

On fine days he would jump on his motorbike to ride around the woods. On rainy, windy or snowy days, he’d use the old 4-wheel drive. Well aware of his responsibilities, Cuisines Schmidt being one of the chief employers in the region, Hubert Schmidt involved himself in local life.

He laid the foundations of his business philosophy which today still governs the firm: “moving forward with other people”.

Antonia Leitzgen proudly describes her father’s personality:
- He liked to laugh and have parties, but he always behaved. He was very punctual and respected by all. He loved hunting – he’d have given his life to that, but he never neglected his business for a single second.

HUBERT SCHMIDT A HUNTSMAN BOSS
Antonia Schmidt married on 28th January 1967. She was the last of the three sisters “to take the plunge”. She started work in the family firm in 1958, her two sisters, Adelheid and Hilde, married two brothers; all of them were involved in the firm. After studying at business schools in St Wendel and then Bad Pyrmont in Westphalia, Antonia took a one-year internship at the Volksbank in St Wendel before honing her skills in sales management, accountancy and staffing within the family business. But what she liked most was representing Schmidt Küchen at trade-fairs and various events where she excelled.

In 1967, Antonia met her husband-to-be, Karl Leitzgen, at the Türkismühle plant where his parents, who ran a furniture, carpet and curtain business but were also wine growers, had come to order some kitchen cabinets. Love at first sight!

The man nicknamed Charlie seemed way off kitchen furniture; he came from the oil industry being a chemical engineer at Standard Oil with a promising future; there was even talk of his being appointed to New York. But Antonia didn’t want to go to America. Hubert Schmidt offered his son-in-law the job of managing the Liépvre factory in replacement of Walter Thierrmann, Adelheid’s husband, who was in charge of both plants and no longer wanted to keep dividing his time between the two.

“I spoke practically no French at the time, Karl Leitzgen recalled in a local press interview in 1980. 350 people were employed at Türkismühle and only 100 in France. The parent company remained in Germany, but that was to change at the instigation of the new CEO of Liépvre.

From then on, in 1967, Adelheid and her husband, Walter Thierrmann, were to manage Türkismühle under the eye of the patriarch, Hubert. Hilde and her husband were in charge of Sindorf, a wholesale and retail furniture company near Cologne.

Karl Leitzgen moved to France. Antonia preferred to wait until the flat on the first floor of the Liépvre plant had been fitted out before joining him. She stayed on a year with her parents in Türkismühle.

“I used to come once a month to Liépvre, Antonia remembers.

In 1968, she moved there for good. She learnt French, looked after social and public relations. The factory employed some 100 people, mostly from the valley. Cuisines Schmidt organized a bus service for the employees.

And what about the products, those famous kitchen cabinets? They were veneered in oak, walnut and ash. In 1968, Melamine-veneered cabinets were manufactured as well as ‘Brigitte’ and the celebrated yellow or blue Formica units.

Karl Leitzgen, the engineer, was brimming with ideas.

He took his job seriously, officially he was in charge of the technical side but he quickly learned to gauge the evolution of the market and trained himself up in highly specialized marketing and management skills.

His job, under the supervision of the parent company, was to ensure regular manufacture of furniture, the management of work materials, deliveries from suppliers and supplying customers. He was not expected to imagine the future, nor to revolutionize everything. But the time would come...
It was not until the 1970’s that French customers started being attracted to this design.

The European market started evolving: sales of traditional dressers began to fall off, leaving scope for the attractive and functional fitted kitchens.

- Ours is a mere family business making a fairly simple product with no clear policy and no well-defined structures. We are nothing but the subsidiary of a Saarland firm, Karl Leitzgen reckoned. We’ve three timeworn vans constantly under repair, old machines inherited from Türkismühle. If we don’t change, we’ll die.

The situation was getting tense in Germany. The firm was in tight straits.

Karl took drastic action and, in 1975, when Hubert Schmidt handed on the firm to his daughters, he decided no longer to remain a mere subsidiary of the Saarland parent company, but to define in France his own industrial strategy.

Liépvre was henceforth free to stand on its own two feet. Karl Leitzgen undertook a survey to determine the popularity of the Cuisines Schmidt brand. The result was encouraging: the German-sounding brand-name symbolized technology, know-how and quality.

The origin of the dresser is lost in the mists of time, but the concept has lived on: two cupboards, one on top of the other, front-opening doors and, sometimes, an open shelf space...

The design didn’t vary much over time. If they sold well, the shelving was improved just a little and the worktop sometimes equipped with a bread slicer (in Germany) or an all-purpose cutting machine (in France).

In 1959, whereas traditional dressers were still selling well in France, the first fitted kitchen units were being proposed at trade fairs in Germany - and Schmid Küchen manufactured more and more at Türkismühle.
A quite straightforward but effective strategy was to govern the birth of the brand name being present everywhere and consequently having a wide distribution network. The exclusive sales and showrooms were to be situated no more than an hour’s distance from big city centres and were to have the same design inside and out. The first 8-page catalogue, in four colours, was printed and presented three models: Classic, Prestige and Standard which were obtainable in ten different colours. 60,000 kitchen cabinets were manufactured that same year.

- From then on, explains Hubertus Kirchen, the sales representatives’ job evolved. You had to provide advice and backing to the exclusive retailers to help them develop their turnover.

But in business management, his creed was humanistic: in his eyes employees constituted the firm’s best investment, its greatest asset.

These values are still pursued by his daughters, Anne and Caroline, and adhered to by all the women and men of Schmidt Groupe.

Patrice Casenave, the young head of the human resources department, joined the firm in 2013 and has forgotten nothing of her first contact nor of her amazement:

- When I was interviewed for the job by Anne Leitzgen, I thought it was a dream; too good to be true, this idea of a liberated enterprise...

The legacy of Karl Leitzgen is still very much alive.
In 1978, the CEO realized that he could no longer do everything on his own. He decided to recruit managers, technicians, engineers and sales-staff, all keen to move ahead and win.

- With us, the thinking is not done by a single person but by everyone.

Far-reaching challenges, the will to expand the business, the wish to innovate: to meet these, Karl Leitzgen had to gather around him new people, young and competent.

Among this young guard was a certain Jean-Marie Schwab:

- That year, I was about to leave for Guiana where I had a parquet floor laying contract. My father was a carpenter and I'd just graduated from the Ecole du Bois (carpentry school) with a marketing option. Nevertheless, answering an advertisement for a technical salesman’s job at Schmidt’s, Karl Leitzgen was in the process of launching his bespoke kitchens. I fell under the spell. I cancelled my contract and joined the boss in his adventure. He liked being with young people and deeply trusted us all.

Jean-Marie Schwab had just turned 22:

- For a year I worked in all the production services. I knew the product by heart. Then Karl Leitzgen asked me to set up the sales management service to check orders and ensure customer relations.

Trust and involvement – the young man had met the boss of a lifetime.
Bernard Muller, the production manager, recalls that:

- In 1978, we were nowhere in the world of kitchen units.

So Karl Leitzgen gave this new engineer the job of industrializing the manufacturing process. Cuisines Schmidt’s mass-production required huge storage space. The units were assembled by frame-fitters according to the size of the units. For each unit size, there had to be a frame-fitting machine! An entire production hall was taken up by the frame-fitters and the tools needed for assembling the units which were manufactured one by one then deposited on conveyor belts to facilitate transportation.

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- As a child, I discovered the first machines with digital controls installed at the end of the 1970’s, recalls Anne Leitzgen.

When the French factory started to mass-produce bespoke kitchen units, Türkismühle viewed the innovation unfavourably. But Karl Leitzgen was undeterred and took all possible steps to improve production: a time clock was installed in the factory to enable staff to measure their working periods better.

In this way, between 200 and 220 shift workers clocked in at 6.30am and 5 pm. The firm further expanded the bus network to provide transport.

The remaining receipts came from the 2,500 customer accounts managed by the company’s four sales-representatives. During a visit to an Atlas store in western France, Jean-Marie Schwab learnt that they were giving up kitchen sales – and that amounted to a quarter of Cuisine Schmidt’s turnover.

As soon as he learned that, Karl Leitzgen decided to quit the central furniture purchasing bodies in order to develop a wide network of specialists.

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**The irresistible ascent**

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The leading enterprises at the time were called Mobalpa, Arthur-Bonnet, Teisseire, and Vogica.

But Schmidt was nibbling away at the market, catching up. The aim was to improve production and sales, to be known and no longer remain just another brand in the furniture department stores.
He met in turn all the mass-marketing managers (Atlas, Global, Conforama, Monsieur Meuble...) and offered to associate them with his brand and create exclusive Cuisine Schmidt sales outlets.

Faced with the refusal of some and the divergent tactics of others, Karl Leitzgen brought in the revolution that was to change the brand’s whole strategy.

Little by little he withdrew from mass-marketing and set up exclusive shops. Karl also started moving onto the markets of Switzerland and Belgium, two countries close to Alsace. It was the beginnings of exportation. A jump into the unknown that was to prove terribly effective.

In 1983, Cuisines Schmidt made a complete turnaround, abandoning the manufacture of kitchen-cabinets. It was the end of an era. On 13th July, the last cabinet came off the production line. in Liépvre. From then on, the company started proposing two edge-band thicknesses and set up the first made-to-order frontage process, a European ‘first’.

Two years before, the Cuisin’or brand had been created, but it was to be as short-lived as the product it launched.

- We created a new range just when we were abandoning the cabinet! I think the sole Cuisin’or left in the world is Mrs Leitzgen’s kitchen, reckons Bernard Muller with a twinkle in his eye.

But Cuisin’or had enabled Cuisines Schmidt to gently withdraw from mass marketing and set up its own exclusive sales network without in any way penalizing or damaging the interests of the cabinet-makers who were still selling Schmidt kitchens.

“Cuisin’or – Cuisine et Décoration” furniture was identical to that of Cuisines Schmidt except for the handles and facings which were slightly modified, but they also proposed tea-towels, napkins and decorated, laminated facings...

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Openings were often attended by champion cyclists and singers. Publicity campaigns were launched. But, two years later, the brand disappeared: its products were 7% more expensive than those of Cuisines Schmidt sold in department stores. The concessionaires were upset and protested.

In 1983, Cuisines Schmidt became S.A.L.M (Société Alsacienne de Meubles).

A few years later, Karl Leitzgen’s vision of things materialized. The Cuisines Schmidt brand-name was born; it had its own distribution network and was no longer sold under a label via mass-marketing. Cuisines Schmidt had become the 5th manufacturer on the French market.

In 1983, Cuisines Schmidt became S.A.L.M (Société Alsacienne de Meubles).

A year before, the firm had opened a subsidiary in England, a country where French products were greatly appreciated for their quality and hard-wearing.

In Montpellier, Marie-Christine Vila used to sell furniture in kit form as well as Schmidt products. She had no stock when she opened her little 25 sq. m. shop, so she would make a down payment when ordering and then, by paying the manufacturer within a week, she got a 5% discount: her profit! She developed her business into a franchise, “Promo cuisines”; the shops were bigger and well designed. A great success.

In Epinal, Denis Colot took inspiration from her system and created “Eco Cuisine”.

As for Patrick Guyot, a former furniture salesman, he launched his “Go Cuisines” shop on 27th June 1985 in Audincourt, near Montbéliard.

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Cuisines Schmidt used it as a pilot scheme but, a short while later, these new networks – two franchise networks and another with independent shops – made up half of Cuisines Schmidt’s turnover. This created a weakness for the company which didn’t want to depend on a handful of clients.

In 1988, Karl Leitzgen invested over 50 million francs in a wide brand policy. A crucial decision that led the firm into a new approach. The network of sales specialists needed convincing. Jean Marie Schwab pleaded the case, even proposing help with publicity and training, thus endlessly reaffirming Karl Leitzgen’s motto: “Together we are stronger”.

The managing agents of Promo Cuisines, Go Cuisines and Eco Cuisine trusted him and joined together under the Cuisine Schmidt brand name: quite a feat! and the beginning of a great episode in the brand’s history with its network.
The exclusive network increased sales and called for innovations, so it was time to imagine new methods of creation conception, management and production.

Karl Leitzgen wanted to transform the entire business into custom manufacturing.

- Up to that time, stocks were made and then sold. The new idea was to manufacture exclusively to order, to reduce stocks and to respond to customers’ specific orders placed at the sales outlets.

Karl Leitzgen began innovating and, together with the sales and technical departments, imagined a new process, unique in Europe, for manufacturing facings.

He offered consumers the widest choice of modern facings on the market.

- That was the real revolution made by Cuisines Schmidt but it required huge investments, recalls Wolfgang Thorwart who was working on the development of the second production line in close collaboration with Bernard Muller, the custom-manufacturing artisan.

In January 1986, the company’s 35 senior staff members held a brainstorm out of which emerged a motto defining the company’s basic values:

“We want to be the best, to respect everyone, to succeed together”, remembers Rémy Uhl, who was the company’s financial manager.

This conquering policy was accompanied by the opening of a new factory in Sélestat, called U1, which was opened on 22nd September 1989. U1 was a modern factory semi-automated with digitalized controls. It began by sub-contracting the Lièpvre manufacturing and later specialized in furniture facings by means of a unique finishing workshop. A new era had begun.

Custom manufacturing is also an adaptation, a flexible way of meeting customers’ specific needs.

The choice of colours, materials and design all takes place between the customer and the designer-salesman, by means of a computer.

Cuisines Schmidt is truly expert in personalizing its products and meeting individual requests!
In 1988, the German factory was faring badly. Karl Leitzgen was urged to take charge of it. At first he refused, but then over several months he spent two days each week in Türkismühle auditing the firm and helping out. He drew up several recommendations that "Schmidt-Küchen" ignored. A few months later, the firm went into liquidation.

On 27th December 1988, Karl Leitzgen went over to Türkismühle with Jean-Marie Schwab, his sales manager. The two men assessed the damage: the historic site was in ruins, the machines dilapidated, the network non-existent, and the products outdated. But there was no question of handing the German brand-name over to competitors, including the French.

On 2nd April 1989, Schmidt Küchen opened shops, launched some new products and brought in some new machines. The turnover increased but the company still hadn’t regained its equilibrium and was losing money. However Karl was confident. He battled to the end to maintain all the jobs. For him it was a question of personal integrity, his own responsibility.

In 1995, six months after the death of Karl Leitzgen, Jean-Marie Schwab, accompanied by Jacques Haas, called a meeting of the entire staff and read out the names of fifty redundancies ("after a sleepless night", he recalls). With the backing of the trade-union delegate of the branch, who saw it as the last chance to save the company, the move was drastic, but necessary.

Schmidt Küchen caught up as a profitable business. In Germany we were nobody. Our motivation was more sentimental than economic. Nevertheless we are attached to this plant and there has never been any question of our closing it down, affirms Caroline Leitzgen.

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Here, in the kitchen world, they thought we were mad. We adapted the Schmidt concept to the market: our aim, to have 300 outlets in Germany, meant ten new openings each year. Here we weren’t a brand-name. Not yet...

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The brand-name, Cuisines Schmidt, with its 200 sales outlets, was launched at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris with the star impersonator, Yves Lecoq on 23rd January 1989 and backed by the first TV adverts. Three months later, the network had taken in 50 new outlets. In September that year, the first open-door days were held to enable the public to discover the factory in Sélestat, called U1. Over 5,000 people crowded into the plant. Hubert Schmidt presided over the celebration for the last time.

The kitchen model presented in the TV adverts

September 1989 - The inaugural procession: Karl Leitzgen showing local elected representatives around the new factory in Sélestat
In fact, we industrialized bespoke furniture knowing that custom-building is considered a fine art, considers Michel Siaud, purchasing manager, who joined the company in 1995.

The challenge can be summarized in a few words: how to industrialize a traditional craft process to respond to a personal, individual order and satisfy everybody’s wishes? “I should like one purple door, one blue, and pink panels”, the customer says.

It’s then up to the factory to design and manufacture this unique kitchen. And yet the job won’t be done by a traditional craftsman, but by an industrial craftsman.

When we recruit new employees, they need time to get used to our custom-manufacturing culture. It’s based on different principles and it’s unique, explains Anne Leitzgen.

Wolfgang Thorwart explains it in this way:

“Our approach is greatly inspired by the motor-car industry, where cars are always mass produced with optional extras offered to the buyer.

But the similarity stops there, because with Schmidt everything is made to measure.

In 1990 growth was well under way. Custom-manufacturing had replaced run of the mill and costly stock production. From being the fifth manufacturer in France, the SALM group rose to second place in 1990, increasing its number of employees from 270 to 650.

SALM again diversified its products and brought out a new bathroom range. This was an overall concept of the bathroom based on installing furniture and integrating all the sanitary appliances without touching the walls. They were bathrooms that retailers could design, propose and install with the same know how they had already mastered for kitchens.
In 1991, the Vancel brand was losing ground in furniture mass-marketing and among the multi-brand kitchen installers. To remedy the situation, a new network to attract the average, “middle-range” consumer had to be worked on. A brand study was undertaken which resulted in the adoption of Cuisinella, a brand-name sounding young, Italian and more approachable...

Karl Leitzgen was at first reticent. The Schmidt network was working well, yielding good results and the Gulf war was causing a period of uncertainty..., Nevertheless he launched into the adventure with his team.

A year later the results were disappointing. Cuisinella’s growth was too slow. - One day, Jean-Marie Schwab explains, I opened my heart to my sales manager, Bruno Gutierrez.

He answered: ‘Give me a team and I’ll build you a network’.

1997: Success! Bruno Gutierrez had managed to convince new kitchen retailers to take on the brand. Nowadays, Cuisinella sells more kitchens in number than Schmidt... After a study trip with his sales clients and Mr. Périgot, the accessories king, SALM launched Cuisinella 1000 (each sales outlet having a surface of 1000 sq. m.). The brand offered the whole kitchen range from A to Z, including accessories. But it didn’t catch on. SALM reverted to its initial concept.

- Bruno succeeded in opening out the Cuisinella network. The 52 outlets in 1998 had grown to 219 by 2015, making it the second specialist network in France. He was able to anticipate the changes and transformations in the trade and work them into his action plan.

Bruno Gutierrez died on 23rd September 2013 at the age of 55. In a heartrending tribute, Anne Leitzgen said of him:

- We have lost our sales and marketing director and we have also lost a faithful, devoted and professional colleague. For many of us, Bruno had become more than a colleague; he was a friend, a mentor, an accomplice. He left his mark on the history of our company and of our family. We shall remember him with affection and gratitude.

Over the years, and being better and better informed about what they could ask for, customers became more and more demanding. They wanted their own kitchen, not their neighbour’s, and quality became a must!. Having been subjected to the antics of certain kitchen fitters, take discounts, bluff sales, they took care to seek out a quality service. And that’s precisely in line with what Karl Leitzgen and his teams were seeking to provide at the beginning of the 1990’s.

Other innovations would follow, notably in custom-built shelving.
In 1993, the Cuisines Schmidt brand became Schmidt. Karl Leitzgen passed away two years later.

The mark he left is still closely felt today in the factories. Those who knew him speak movingly of “Monsieur Leitzgen” or “Charlie”, the others feel they knew him.

No greater tribute can be paid to a captain of industry. - When my husband was carried to his grave, the whole village turned out to pay their last respects. Even the workers from the Türkismühle factory came to the funeral. It was very moving, a tribute to his decency, says Antonia Leitzgen.

Not being very up in business matters, my daughters were too young to take over the family enterprise so I decided to take the chairmanship and rely on the existing managerial team.

In 1998, SALM sought to move into a fast-growing market which it had not explored, that of kit kitchens. It set up EMK, l’Européenne de Meubles en Kit (European Kit-furniture Company) which deployed an industrial conception of a product totally different from the fitted kitchen.

An innovative range of 57 units was proposed to department stores deliverable in the record time of one week.

But EMK was not only distinguished by this competitive offer, it further guaranteed services adapted to customers’ requirements: in-house training for sales staff, support in setting up shop displays, catalogues...

Difficulties which had arisen within the business of one of its main clients brought about a considerable drop in turnover and the erosion of several years’ cash flow and put an end to EMK in 2015.

Schmidt Groupe decided to revert to the heart of its trade: running the network and the brands.
When someone who has left a deep mark on an enterprise disappears, the business can become unstable; a crisis of governance can arise and endanger its continuity. But regarding SALM and the disappearance of its chairman, this would be to forget the deep belief in the value of human beings that filled Karl Leitzgen. He had given the firm solid roots and left it in a perfectly healthy condition, robust, and with a force directed towards its objectives, towards the place he wanted to bring it to.
Karl Leitzgen’s legacy is still very much alive

All the lights were green; Anne Leitzgen was appointed Chairwoman in 2006.
- Ah, yes, already ten years at the wheel, she says with a little smile.

Having joined the company at the end of 1999, she began in the marketing department, moved on to sales management, worked on the development of the network in French-speaking Switzerland and finally in the human resources department.
- I then progressively took on my directorial functions.

After a short, thoughtful pause and with a lively and mischievous look behind her glasses, she continues:
- If it had to be done again, I’d do it the same way but spend even more time at it. One has constantly to be in training…It’s not a luxury, it’s essential.

She asserts these words with the calm certainty brought by her experience of working “on the job”. Anne Leitzgen is not at all like those frosty and pitiless “executive-women” obsessed with power. She could quite naturally adopt the exhortation of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy to every American citizen on his election to the White House in 1960: “Don’t ask what your country can do for you; ask yourself what you can do for your country” – simply replacing the word ‘country’ by ‘enterprise’.

She can talk endlessly about the company, is unquenchable when it comes to detailing all the trades within the ‘extended Enterprise’ and the challenges it will have to face, but she is much more discreet when it comes to talking about herself. She refuses to consider that she embodies the Group. The founder’s granddaughter will never exclaim: “Schmidt Groupe is me!”.

- Schmidt Groupe, she forcefully proclaims, is made of those who make it. It is they who give it its identity. We live here, there’s no gap between those who work for and in the company. My mother lives opposite the factory and my house is 5km away. I’ve been told that shaking hands, smiling, knowing the people you work with, is not the case in all businesses. But that’s how it is here!

Which Patrice Casenave neatly sums up as:
- The DNA of the company’s values is Anne!

Anne Leitzgen embodies and gives life to the values passed on by her parents, the first of which, written in gold letters, is: respect for other people. Her sister Caroline concurs completely when recalling what her father and grandfather used to say:
- Respect all the employees; it’s thanks to them that you eat every day.

In an interview in 1990, “Charlie” said his aim was to be among the ten most prominent European businesses in his field, with over 1000 employees and a turnover of one billion francs. In 2004, these goals had been achieved with a range of custom-built furniture and cupboards. And more than ever, it’s the “Leitzgens” who are at the helm of this amazing, both family and industrial, enterprise. Antonia Leitzgen took the helm in September 1995. She pursued her husband’s work, relying notably on the support of Jean-Marie Schwab, one of the pillars of the enterprise. In his view:
- She is a woman with character, generous and convivial. But she can impose her ideas with authority. She courageously put the keys of the business in the hands of people outside the family. She trusted us. I remember the day I told her that we had to invest 35 million francs in the industrial plant in Lièpvre…

- You have my full confidence, she said.

That same year, the elder of the two daughters, Caroline, took on the job of marketing director at Turkismühle. Her younger sister, Anne, after working in several publicity agencies where she rubbed shoulders with the advertising world, came back into the family preserve, where she would begin by discovering and learning all the various trades in the business.

SALM stepped up its development: in 2000 it bought up a chairs and tables manufacture. A year later, to respond to strong rising demand, it expanded the UI factory which, within its 34,000 sq. m, housed one of the largest manufactures of worktops in Europe. In 2003, the Schmidt Kitchens concept was exported to Spain and Italy.

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- You have my full confidence, she said.
Some businesses are disembodied; the family side is not necessarily a guarantee. They are so totally focused on profit-making that they lose their values along the way and risk coming off the road, Anne Leitzgen explains. I hope this will never be the case with us. In many businesses I have dealings with, the directors’ philosophy is: “I set the course and we’ll find the right people to attain our goals!” Personally, I prefer to have the right people already on board and collect all our forces in order to set the course. Together! In such shifting times it’s better to have agile talent around one. The life of a company is sometimes made out of powerful encounters, shared passions. Such was the case with Jean-Claude Armspach:

- I met Anne at the Trade and Management Institute. We were both getting our training and were working on the same case-study. In 2007, she offered me a job in her company. The choice wasn’t very easy for me having spent 30 years working in a different sector, but I agreed to join this new world.

That same year, SALM was classified as the first manufacturer in France and the fifth in Europe, with 1,300 employees and a turnover of 295 million Euros.

To become leader, the company had to adapt in order to respond to new trends and customers’ expectations.

He was struck by the pride of all his fellow employees. Everyone was recognized for their skills and their place in the firm and contributed to improving performance. A huge dream team…He quickly understood that their pride was the fruit of a culture. You either took it on or you went your way. Jean-Claude Armspach stayed on…

- In this place the undying search for excellence is in the blood- I was put in charge of piloting the launching our new U2 automated factory in Sélestat. It opened in 2007. A year and a half after bringing in the first excavator, the over 25,000 sq.m. site was operational. The first orders were rapidly delivered enabling the Group to generate a growth close on 10% over the next two years. Furthermore, the steps taken to adapt the production processing took account of the proposals of the staff both in terms of the ergonomics of their jobs and reducing day-to-day costs.

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For Anne Leitzgen there can be no question of paternalism at Schmidt’s:

- It’s simply a question of responsibility. Many people depend on us, on our decisions, and vice versa. There’s a first feature that gives meaning: I represent the shareholder family. It is indeed a reassuring function, the assertion that we wish to remain an independent and a family enterprise. But if I do anything amiss, the other shareholders and the Supervision Council are there to call me to order.

And with a grin, she adds:

- If that happened, the teams I work with wouldn’t let me wander off for long. They’d quickly point out the risks they could spot or the opportunities not to be missed…

Sometimes inspired by Saint-Simonism, some Alsatian employers did not hesitate to introduce measures far in advance of their time, like granting their workers a savings account after five years’ employment.

In the nineteenth century, several company directors adopted a paternalistic approach towards their employees, providing care at all the levels of their lives: training, housing, schools, hospitals, pensions… Based on human motives, these social measures were designed to further social life. “An employer owes his workers more than a salary”, declared Frédéric-Engel Dollfus of the Dollfus-Mieg Co. in 1857.

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Visiting U2 is to enter a fascinating world, a world of robots, a sort of cathedral where the organ music would be replaced by the sound of the machines. But nothing is dehumanized. To be guided through the process of manufacturing a customized kitchen, ordered in Strasbourg, London or Madrid, is really enlightening. Colour, size, weight, finishing, shape... it’s all there. The concert can begin.

You come in via the wings. The manufacturing lines are set in front of you. Many machines and robot arms twirl in a harmonious symphony. Some answer the name of “Lucky Luke” or “Ma’ Dalton” (French comic book characters).

The various elements are assembled; everyone brings in their added value, both the men and the machines. The process begins with the laminated panel, of various thicknesses being cut to shape and the edge band glued into place. Further on, a water jet cutter, unique throughout the world, cuts out the back of the casing.

After going through the “jukebox”, the panels of the casing are assembled with hinges, everything being checked by a specialist. Once packed, the units are taken away on a small automated trolley; a gigantic robot arm seizes hold of the different sized packets and deposits them in a huge stock area under a 15 m.-high roof. A few hours later, the same arm transfers them in precise loading order onto the bay.

The trucks arrive and the whole kitchen, in 30 packets, is loaded onto them in the order corresponding to delivery. It will be installed on schedule under the vigilant eye of the designer-salesman.

A mere six weeks will have passed between the moment the consumer chose his new kitchen and its delivery.
The concept of industrial customized furniture is based on a technical feat and the management of data. But also on human beings: all the operations are meticulously controlled: the workers assemble and assess the job.

- They are answerable for the robots’ work, explains Jacques Haas, financial and administrative director and currently associate managing director of the Chinese subsidiary firm, who joined the firm in 1990 and knows the business inside out:
  - Piloting our machines has not been handed over to robots. Factories rely on the skills of the workers.

- I have the enviable luxury of being able to rely on people more competent than I am, declares Anne Leitzgen. The perfect mastery of all the necessary skills and a systemic vision of things are essential at Schmidt Groupe. Bernard Muller recalls:
  - In the 1980’s, when all the new installations were brought in, we would show the operators how to assemble furniture. It took about six weeks for the process to be assimilated by everyone.

Starting from the customers, anticipating their needs, understanding and carrying them out for their happiness: the whole business can be summed up in this way. It also includes the retail agent commercializing the Schmid or Cuisinella brands.

If Schmid Groupe works out a real “B to B to C” marketing strategy, it is currently moving towards the “Human to Human” approach thanks to its “extended Enterprise”, where everything is to do with real people. The “H to H” approach is based on a relationship that is professional, attentive, accountable and even emotional.

- We are lucky enough to be on a growing market and to be able to master the whole chain of values right up to the enthusiastic satisfaction of our consumers in the privacy of their homes, reckons Jean-Thierry Catrice. The Schmid and Cuisinella brands must live up to the consumer’s trust in the sales agent.
Please, Sir, draw me a kitchen

At one of the numerous Schmidt shops, the one on avenue Parmentier, in the 11th District in Paris, the reception is pleasing. Five or six different models are on show, dozens of others are to be found in the catalogue. Take a quick look around the showroom, at the description of the materials, the styles and the functions of the various units. One pleasant detail: the salesman doesn’t steer you into the most expensive solutions. He describes the quartz, the laminate, the wood, the lacquer or the ceramics.

He shows you the colour schemes, the handle fittings, the cupboards, the extractor hoods, electrical appliances, placing possibilities. Then he’ll mandate you with questions about your ideas, what you fancy, your needs and your budget. After this first encounter, he’ll start building your project. When you return he’ll set out before you all the possible simulations in 3D. Then you can make your choice and he’ll draw up an estimate for you. Naturally, the installation and after-sales service with the Schmidt Excellence Warranty are included in the price.

Delivery takes about six weeks. Meanwhile everything will be checked down to the last detail. The company will faithfully carry out the customer’s instructions set out by the designer salesman. Co-creation is and always will be. That is Schmidt’s secret: by personalizing our manufacturing, our creation is and always will be. That is Schmidt’s secret: by personalizing our manufacturing, our creation is and always will be. That is Schmidt’s secret: by personalizing our manufacturing, our creation is and always will be. That is Schmidt’s secret: by personalizing our manufacturing, our creation is and always will be.
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Kitchen furniture is no high-technology product, so what distinguishes it from its competitors is its price. A kitchen of Schmidt Groupe, being within the reach of most consumers, demonstrates the difference between Schmidt Groupe kitchens and the others. The consumer is bound to be more demanding with a brand-name product than with an anonymous one.

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Automation, piloting, personalizing, production capacity... Wolfgang Thorwart affirms that:
- By diversifying our offer, we’ve got beyond the teams’ mental capacity, but things have to be piloted through and the machines kept under control.
Olivier Offner, associate industrial manager, launches into mind-boggling calculations. For example, custom-built casing can give rise to 16,500 components per day, multiplied by 50 different colours; custom-built facing involves 10,000 pieces a day in 260 different colours, drawing on more than 200,000 references.

This is where, Franck Ostertag, the organization and data systems manager (the ODSM), comes in. We clearly state “information” and not “digitalization”. The point is not to put computers on line but to inject data into them:
- Our information system is very sophisticated, the digital side has long been vital for the business. Just think to manufacture a single piece of furniture 40,000 data are injected into the system! For each piece of furniture is unique, made-to-measure for the requirements of each customer. We don’t mass-produce, nothing but made-to-measure.

Figures that make you dizzy and require solid nerves to keep the pace.
- Zero defects is a must. U2 constituted a complete break with the past. Nowadays, data is injected every 12 minutes. The slightest error has to be paid for.

Whence the importance of another trade: maintenance. At this sustained pace, industrial installations have to be totally reliable, each stoppage costs time, endangers quality and, in the end, causes disappointment for customers. One can better grasp why maintenance has become of the utmost importance, whereas other traditional sectors are receding:
- We train fewer and fewer cabinet makers because the whole trade has become too dependent on a series of industrialized processes, explains Caroline Leitzgen.

All the employees efforts have borne fruit: Schmidt Groupe is the sole manufacturer to have obtained six certifications for quality (ISO 9001), safety (OHSAS 18001), environment (ISO 14001), sustainable forest management (PEFC wood), energy (ISO 50001) and the quality norm for respect for the environment (NF Environment Furnishing).
Operators, quality supervisors, delivery drivers, sales staff, concessionaires (employers, designer-salesmen, assistants, installers), administrative staff... what a collection of professionals! Schmidt Groupe gives pride of place to training and integration. Apprenticeship trainers take care of young people who join the enterprise. But receiving teaching is not enough: you also have to stay on the top level. That’s why in-house training is ongoing, enabling the employees to progress in their career. What about those who join Schmidt Groupe? Each one goes through an integration process, can have access to tutors, including the managerial staff who are all placed under the mentorship of a member of the management team. More than 3,000 designer-sales staff, shop managers, installers are trained at Schmidt Groupe training Academy.

- We conceived our own sales technique, a real added value compared to our competitors. Nowadays, we provide all the necessary tools for commercial success with the priority objective of satisfying the customer and making him an ambassador.

So we train our technicians in sales, and sales staff in technical capabilities, improving knowledge of the products, in particular the new ones, a commercial argument which incites them to sell bespoke fittings for homes. We accompany shop managers who feel the need and back their management policies and means of achieving their aims. We certify the installation of our custom-built furniture after the training given to the installers, explains Fabrice Lalzace, who is in charge of training the retail network.

To reach all of the sales personnel, we have invented on-line training. E-learning modules considerably reduce travelling. But we also provide training in the use of software over the phone, through ‘virtual classes’.

Ever and again, the same principle: “the greatest asset of any business is the people who belong to it”… and not merely all those figures in an accountancy balance sheet.

The certification of installers reinforces the quality of the network. 2,500 installers trained by Schmidt Groupe are the brand’s ambassadors. For this reason, consumers must be made confident by guaranteeing quality installations. The installer has to join the Network Quality System (NQS) to be made confident by installing quality installations. The installer guarantees the quality of the work and the know-how of the work site. For this reason, consumers must be made confident by guaranteeing quality installations. The installer must join the Network Quality System (NQS). At the training centre in Sainte-Croix, 300 installers obtain certification of their installation quality, the cleanliness of the work site and their know-how.
What of tomorrow? What is the first French kitchen manufacturer aiming for? What projects has a company heir of two visionary leaders? The reply bursts forth: more and more mastery, more quality for an enterprise like ours which is internationalizing and digitalizing! The Schmidt ship has to be directed towards the consumer: that's the reference point of the “Work”, going from desire to product, from the buyer to the manufacturer. A product cannot be imposed, the buyer and the seller, both have to be listened to. For this reason, the Group describes its mission in the following way: “Why”: we contribute through our products and our services to the wellbeing and lasting pleasure of consumers in their household; “How”: by becoming the Group providing consumers’ with their favourite European brands of bespoke house-furnishing; “What”: by offering enthusiastic consumers bespoke products and personalized services, via its worldwide network, in Europe and in China.
Schmidt ceased being one single brand name way back in 1992, with the launching of Cuisinella.

But diversification extends beyond that. Schmidt proposes bathrooms, timeless and contemporary bespoke storage units, where practicality, ergonomics and attractiveness offer unique and personalized comfort. New, off-line and on-line publicity campaigns, both in France and internationally, accompany these constantly renewed offers.

So what is the new challenge? To make Schmidt more than a kitchen builder by becoming a leading bespoke home furnisher, a true specialist in planning living space in the service of the art of life.
Cuisinella, leading brand in its field in France, pursues its dazzling development, and remains a favourite with clients. The brand principally supplies affordable design kitchens but also invests heavily in attractive home organization solutions that reflect the consumer's own personality. In 2016 Cuisinella became international with the opening of its first outlet in Belgium. Cuisinella is the brand that listens to the wishes of its customers.

Cuisinella – New in 2017: a brushed metal and glazed model

In Sélestat, being the daughter and the wife of cabinet makers, Fabienne Huber quite naturally took her turn in supplying kitchen furniture. She already knew Vancel but was bowled over by Cuisinella after visiting a pilot store in Epinal. With her husband, she opened her own 160 sq. m Cuisinella shop on 12th June 1992. Her very first sale was a red Verona kitchen, in those days presented in a little 12-page catalogue.

- We had no computers. All the quotations, the orders, the tracing...we did by hand! It took us three times longer than nowadays. And before the fax came in we sent every order by post. Just imagine...

But SALM quickly provided us with software "plant" for kitchen designing, "maqbar" for quotations and "gestor" for management. Fabienne and Denis Huber are among the clients who grew up with the development of the brand. Living close by the head office, they are full of admiration for the Leitzgens' skills and very sensitive to their conviviality. Fabienne Huber remembers the ancestor of Euroforum: a meal at the Pommeraie restaurant in Sélestat; three or four tables to accommodate most of the network collaborators, but in a warm atmosphere, Karl Leitzgen would go round from one guest to the next to take stock of events and inspire confidence.

- Every single day, it's a pure joy to be active in a healthy competitive environment. Over the past 23 years we've experienced constant evolution, Fabienne Huber exclaims.

Recently, Fabienne and Denis sold off their concession to their store manager. But they've stayed on with Schmidt Groupe, accompanying and training new dealers.
It is continuing, too, its development policy and investing in other information tools like the "Traceability" project, which references all the logistic streams from manufacture to delivery to the consumer. Store Manager, SM2 software, which pilots the whole organization and customer follow-through in the shops. Customer Relationship Management, CRM, a software interface between prospective customers, concessionaires and consumers that manages and optimizes lasting interrelationships. These tools provide resources for responding more rapidly to the needs of each consumer, facilitating relations and increasing their satisfaction.

Moreover, new tools, indispensable for transforming a kitchen plan into digital data for use by the machines, are being strengthened.

Two hundred staff members are working on this intelligent mechanism capable of limitlessly multiplying made-to-measure offers.

- Our aim is to develop all the information tools to help the performance of our employees and our machines. We want to facilitate the work of our sales staff to limit the risk of mistakes and automate all the jobs that have no added value so that staff can concentrate more on performance tasks, explains Anne Leitzgen.

Digital Innovation, a priority

Digital enterprise and digital factory of the year awards 2014

Reinventing ourselves, rethinking our organization, improving the competitive-nce of our industrial and logistics processes: these are the moves that have enabled us to achieve our digital transformation. Here, with us, digitalization is not a prop but a strategic function, exclaims Franck Ostertag.

The firm also obtained the Digital Factory Award in 2014 for conceiving a system unique in Europe, as well as the Digital Enterprise Award, both awarded by Usine Nouvelle (New Factory).

SAP (Scientific Assessment Panel) Quality Gold Award - category “business transformation” 2014

For ASCENT, the Group’s traceability project: from the factory dispatch sites to logistics platforms and then on to the consumer’s home. The aim is clear, to improve customer satisfaction through real-time monitoring of any dysfunctions, the better to remedy them. The loading bay. All the units in the order are scanned before being loaded onto the platform. Staff supervise the data and manage installations.

The Schmidt truck mutually feeds the four Alsatian plants.

The last production line set up in Lépvre, the robot selects panels to match the order being manufactured.

Millions of Euros have been injected into these digital innovations. It’s a priority measure to meet consumers’ expectations more and more.

The Group is pursuing its digital transformation and is setting up a totally integrated information system.

Moreover, new tools, indispensable for transforming a kitchen plan into digital data for use by the machines, are being strengthened.

An obligatory maintenance operation to avoid breakdowns during production.

The last production line set up in Lépvre, the robot selects panels to match the order being manufactured.

The loading bay. All the units in the order are scanned before being loaded onto the platform.

Staff supervise the data and manage installations.

Digital Innovation, a priority
The Schmidt Groupe concept applies all over, especially in the target countries: Benelux, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The Group also seeks to encourage Schmidt concessions with the support of a Master Franchise agent in Scandinavia, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Since 2015, it has opened more outlets abroad than in France: over 460 Schmidt counselling centres amounting to 60% of the Group’s turnover.

In 2015, Cuisinella also went over the border with a first outlet in Belgium, at Tournai.

International development is well under way.

It’s a lever for strong growth enabling us to limit the risks of being in a single market, Above all, it encourages us to respond better to customer requirements in all countries, and that sharpens our capacity to innovate, comments Anne Leitzgen.

In this way, the Schmidt brand hones the design of its collections in Italy, services in Holland, the quality-price ratio in Germany and product quality in Switzerland. When products and services internationalize, they have to be adapted to meet each country’s language and cultural requirements, with, of course, the support of a local team close to the brand. This means being both global and local.

Thoroughgoing studies of segmentation, the customary noting of consumer preferences and habits, information relayed by the network and trade-fairs, all help define the needs of consumers in different countries. Press relations, publicity and being on the web enable the brand to assert itself. Partnerships with Scandinavian and Italian designers, with Universities like Strasbourg or working with INSA (National Institute of Applied Sciences) enable Schmidt to present a well-recognized innovative offer.

“‘Our excellence knows no frontiers’

The Spanish “Schmidt” network was awarded the title of “Best Chain of Shops 2015-2016” in the Kitchen and Baths category. A reason for pride in work well done among all the employees – and it’s the consumers who vote!
To talk of China in industrial matters is to expose oneself to reproaches and worries. The first word that comes to mind is relocation, for example. But Anne Leitzgen energetically refutes this:

- There's no question of relocation! That would present no interest for logistic, human and quality reasons! Our ambition is totally different; we aim to become a worldwide operator in our field; and the market is gigantic…

It is true that gaining a foothold in the Chinese market, with its high growth and in the absence of a dominant offer in kitchens, is more than tempting. The potential for development is five times higher than in the whole of the European market.

Jacques Haas, thrilled by this new challenge, went off to settle in Canton where the Group’s subsidiary was set up. The new, 65,000 sq. m. factory, which opened in June 2015, is less automated than the European sites - but it started out with 250 employees.

The factory manufactured 36,000 casings in its first period. In 2017, that figure should increase to 1,200,000. A second identical factory will reinforce the first as soon as the volume has materialized.

Suofeiya franchise shops, Schmidt Groupe’s partner and leading manufacturer for individual consumers in China, has a network of franchise shops ready to sell Schmidt products adapted to local tastes: flat-packed in kits. 500 shops have so far opened. Some 1,500 counselling centres will be set up between now and 2022.

French style is catching on more and more in China. The Schmidt brand already stands out through the quality of its products and European design at an affordable price: a unique and innovative positioning in China.

Franco-Chinese synergies are under way. Some of the Group’s suppliers, like Blum, have joined in. Software, brought in to develop production, by piloting manufacturing processes, designing kitchens and running information systems, ensures considerable savings of scale. In this way, little by little, Schmidt products will be personalized. French style made to measure!

Schmidt’s governance in China is Franco-Chinese, pooling the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee.

- Spreading our know-how over there is a good textbook case for our development in each country and becoming the first truly worldwide kitchen furnishing group, considers Anne Leitzgen on her return from China.
Back on board the cruise liner between Marseilles and Genoa. On the stage Anne Leitzgen and Jean-Thierry Catrice, the associate managing director, perform a finely-tuned duet. Witty lines stream forth.

On the screen, a film shows the testimonies of salesmen and trading partners from all over, proclaiming their pride, revealing their expectations, defining their philosophy and work-lines. With a broad smile, one of them, Marc Boudoux, a Schmidt dealer from Bordeaux, says: “Selling is great!” The whole audience applauds.

True to form, the associate managing director remains the driving force everyone knows. Except that, for once, he’s not convincing the troops about a new project but calling them to attack.

He’s doffed his suit and tie to don the black moustache and costume of a pirate: Jean-Thierry Catrice the Bold, the Terror of the High Seas.

His appearance in the big saloon is greeted with peals of laughter.

- Oh Jean-Thierry! Whatever you do, don’t change anything!
- Jean-Thierry Catrice bursts into laughter and brandishes a toy pistol.
- It’s my first intervention at a Euroforum, so I had to mark the occasion!

A few days before, the managing-director had revealed a decidedly more serious side of himself when presenting the “Human-to-Human” policy. Schmidt Groupe has to change its methods of governance and management. Soon, leadership within the ‘extended Enterprise’ will be more collective: both within the firm itself and in the network.

Under the “Be Schmidt” and “Employer Pact” projects a human charter will engage each part and consider each profession.

In this way, the teams will grow, leaving everyone the possibility of enhancing their skills and contributing more effectively to the overall project. Schmidt Groupe must constantly attract skilled employees to ensure its development, share its vision and its ambition to make everyone an ambassador, but it must also identify future dealers and accompany them as they take over their shops.

Consumers, collaborators, suppliers, sales-personnel, all embody the Schmidt and Cuisinella brands. Cross management, trust, listening, initiative, the right to make mistakes, daring, creativity, pleasure at work, the emergence of new talent: such are the new challenges facing Schmidt Groupe.
“Be Schmidt” is the concept forged by the Group to strengthen its managerial culture and good life together.

This approach mobilizes the whole firm and underlines all the initiatives likely to enhance an essential aspect: pleasure at work.

Think-tanks naturally emerged on the themes of management, ways of encouraging collaborators to become aware of their responsibilities and the recognition of individual and collective successes.

“Wall of success”, “Living my job”, “Breaking new ground”, “Coffee Club” are all means of giving day-to-day life to our Star: trust, co-operation, agility, responsibility, kindness, performance and pleasure.

CONQUERING THE WORLD FROM THE FORCE OF OUR ROOTS

To carry on its development while preserving its roots and its identity as a firm having strong human values, Schmidt Groupe has to recruit fresh talent, new collaborators and concessionaires. To foster its reputation as an employer, the Group deploys a corporate website, a film about the firm, press links and presence on social media.

OUR STAR

- Agility
- Pleasure
- Trust
- Kindness
- Responsibility

AT SCHMIDT GROUPE, THE DIFFERENCE IS IN WHAT IS HUMAN

What constitutes the strength and the character of Schmidt Groupe is the commitment of every manager, sales-person, installer or deliverer. To spur along this exceptional team spirit, attract the best people and retain their loyalty, there is a secret: the Employer Pact.

Its aim? Guaranteeing consumer satisfaction by developing that of the sales teams.

- Enabling all the shop-owners to keep on improving the management of their teams, explains Patrice Casenave, Human Resources Director of the "Extended Enterprise".

Creating new products and services, allowing everyone to fulfil their potential and skills: these are the keys to the Group’s success and sustainability.
Home Schmidt Home
or the art of living and storage

The presentation, scenography and staging of Euroforum have all the ingredients of big American conventions. Only the spirit is not the same, nothing is feigned.

“Wow!” Smiles and cheers greet the presentation of products, custom-building and the new Cuisinella ranges. But when Delphine Pfeiffer, Schmidt’s marketing manager, reveals Schmidt’s new concept: the “perfect fit”, true bespoke units at no extra cost, a huge explosion shakes the room.

“Now, that’s really great!”, “That’ll be a big hit!” - Schmidt’s revolution is under way, exclaims Delphine Pfeiffer, raising a clenched fist with a large smile. The consumer is at the heart of our project.

It’s difficult to attribute this motto to any particular person, the notion of an extended enterprise being adopted by all. Chief among all the big projects under way and consumers’ ‘great expectations’ is storage: with smaller flats, making the best use of all available space is of paramount importance. Competitors are all pushing in the same direction, so the challenge is open. That explains the launching of two new concepts catering to lifestyle and opening storage-space: “Schmidt Home Stories” and “Schmidt made-to-measure Cupboards and Furniture”.

Storage space is a major asset for attracting and retaining consumers”

Arnaud Hulbach, Schmidt shops sales manager at Epinal (88)

From the very beginning of the Schmidt Kitchen network, Thierry Beaumont realized the strength and durability of Thierry Beaumont. In 2012, he opened “Le Placard” (Cupboard) next to the Schmidt shop specializing in kitchens. He rightly reckoned that this new venture would prove advantageous and immediately registered his first orders for storage cupboards. “Le Placard” enabled him to retain his customers.

- Sliding doors, TV stands, bookshelves, attract customers. But you have to change the approach and convince the designer-salesmen that storage furniture is a promising market. So when people come into the kitchen shop, we talk about storage. Three employees run “Le Placard”, explains Arnaud Hulbach, a colleague of Thierry Beaumont.
On the liner, Gabriel, a young marketing agent is dumbfounded:
- I’ve only been with the firm for a few months and, a moment ago, as I was boarding the ship, I saw Anne Leitzgen. She interrupted her conversation to come over and shake my hand. He smiles, looking at the sea rolling by:
- In what other group employing over fifteen hundred people does the boss do that? It’s incredible!

Denis Morel, one of the network mobilizers agrees with him:
- Anne is an exceptional Chairwoman. She knows everybody. We all have a strong relationship with her.

The fact that he’s wearing an eye patch and carrying a cutlass in no way detracts from the seriousness of what he says. But what does Madame “Chairwoman” herself think?
- We rely on two mainstays: on the one hand, the manufacture and logistics, and distribution on the other. I tell our teams of network mobilizers to be kind and watchful. There can be no question of letting anyone down or ignoring the difficulties encountered by a shop, a marketing agent or a regional manager, explains Anne Leitzgen.

In Genoa, groups of people move from one stand to the next listening to the explanations given about the products. Visits to the three floors of the Magazzini del Cotone are almost non-stop. On each floor everyone talks endlessly about kitchens:
- Ah! That’s a great idea!
- Customers often ask for drawers with cutlery trays. I always provide them and I think we should take on the idea... Pierre Tanghe goes by carrying a little flag and is followed by a group of dealers. He’s in charge of the legal department:
- You can manufacture the best product in the world, but if you don’t know how to promote and sell it, it’s useless.

The regional director for the whole of the south of France, Mourad Bouamana, agrees. He’s a warm, easy-going man, but quite determined:
- Our job, in the commercial line, is to look after sales. We’re all a bit red-faced and pushy. Sometimes we have to put pressure on the factory, but then we’re simply passing on what the shop managers tell us, in other words what the customers have asked for. And the head office of course pays attention to their remarks.

It’s a unique network in the kitchen world. Schmidt and Cuisinella dealers are not merely franchised like elsewhere; their contract with Schmidt Groupe is more than a partnership:
- In fact, in the space of a single day, they move from being shop owners to becoming Schmidt Groupe clients, partners, sales managers, and then back to being clients. Mourad goes on.
- If a problem arises no one else can do what we do: within less than twenty minutes the commercial management is at the helm.
Mourad chats with a shop manager about customer expectations. He’s well aware that the network is placed “between the hammer and the anvil”.
- The network is the prescriber. He sips his « ristretto » coffee and picks up two sugar sachets:
- If I tell the factory that customers want brown sugar rather than white, they’ll have to react. Sometimes they start grumbling but that’s part of the game. Our network is unique in that longstanding members are very considerate towards newcomers.

Schmidt Groupe attributes its broad success to everyone’s commitment:
- From the captain to the ordinary rating, regardless of the consumers’ tumultuous new expectations and the market headwinds, asserts Anne Leitzgen, thanking the entire audience, filled with energy and motivation.

The ship docks; participants on the first trip to the Euroforum disembark. Two men remain seated: Messrs Waechter and Uhl; they’re among those who welcome the hundreds of other Schmidt and Cuisinella “militants” preparing to embark for the second session:
- We’re on the supervisory board. Of course we’re retired but we’re here to help guarantee the preservation of our values.

The passengers having arrived on the quayside, take their leave, promising to call one another and meet again soon...
- Governing means foreseeing... Foreseeing is also having objectives. By 2025, Schmidt Groupe aims to be consumers’ favourite European brands in made-to-measure home furnishing.
Schmidt Groupe wishes to boost its recognition, fill its customers with enthusiasm and put them at the heart of its concerns, ensure the continuity of the very important notion of an expanded enterprise – leading from the establishment of a sales outlet right up to consumer relations management – in which everyone works together in the same direction.

To achieve these aims, Schmidt Groupe needs the skills and the commitment of everyone. This is the basis of the “Be Schmidt” concept.

In Jean-Thierry Catrice’s view, innovation and being attentive to the consumer are both necessary:

- What new product and what service can we supply to ensure the development of a shop in a climate of ever-increasing competition? What strategy can we devise for the best welfare for the consumers, to make them happy and give them pleasure?

Jean-Luc Klein, chief financial manager of Schmidt Groupe

- From the minute of my arrival in 2015, I was struck by the strong cohesion among the employees. An unusual dynamism. An enterprise like no other. People are trusted, given autonomy and a sense of responsibility. There is kindness, no hierarchy, a sharing of information. Profitable examples are proudly shared. Everyone asserts happiness at their job. But equilibrium needs to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status to be watched, not only because of the firm’s special status.
Schmidt Groupe prône la sérénité pour séduire toujours plus le consommateur, motiver le client et les salariés du Groupe. Comment ? Par une idée de génie :
- La Garantie Excellence Schmidt : un nouvel engagement du Groupe et du réseau qui porte sur une offre globale de services, explique Sylvie Heinis, responsable de ce nouveau service. Et c'est la première fois que Schmidt Groupe réunit quatre cents responsables de magasins en même temps !
La marque passionne. Le service attire.
Si la marque Schmidt est reconnue par la qualité, le sérieux et le sur-mesure, il ne lui manquait plus que le service pour faire la différence : la Garantie Excellence Schmidt, de l'offre des ensembles. Une offre unique, sans frais supplémentaire qui fait déjà chavirer les clients et le cœur des consommateurs :
- dix ans pour les meubles et les pièces métalliques ;
- cinq ans pour la plomberie liée au raccordement de la cuisine en cas de fuite,
- cinq ans pour l'électroménager avec remplacement à neuf sans application de vétusté.
Un numéro unique, dédié aux consommateurs qui pourraient rencontrer des problèmes au cours des dix ans.
- Notre volonté est d'avoir durablement une belle histoire d'avance sur la concurrence, souligne Jean-Thierry Catrice. Et la Garantie Excellence Schmidt est une offre audacieuse qui dépasse le rêve du consommateur. Elle complète les huit autres engagements Schmidt :
- un interlocuteur unique ;
- le devis gratuit sur-mesure après un rendez-vous au domicile ;
- les prix les plus justes (avec remboursement s'ils sont plus élevés qu'ailleurs) ;
- le respect de la date d'installation ;
- la garantie du matériel ;
- la garantie d'achèvement de la pose et de la livraison ;
- la réception de l'aménagement par le vendeur dédié ;
- Schmidt à votre service.
- La marque reste dans la continuité par l'innovation !
- Ensemble tout est possible. C'est incroyable comme je suis déjà porté par la passion de ce groupe de femmes et d'hommes, tout heureux de travailler et de s'investir pour satisfaire toujours plus le consommateur. Le Groupe se remet en question, s'adapte, s'innove. Deux nouveaux prix en témoignent : « Services Clients 2016 » et « Meilleure Chaine de magasins 2017 » et « Meilleure Chaîne de magasins 2016 ». Le potentiel de développement de nos produits et services est énorme. C'est le moment de relever ce défi. Ce qui me motive le plus est le professionnalisme et le niveau de qualité de ce groupe. Je suis fier de représenter Schmidt près de Lyon, confie un directeur de magasin ravi de ce nouveau booster.
C'est un fait : le consommateur a besoin de rangement sur mesure : en France, une cuisine sur deux s'ouvre sur le salon, en Allemagne, c'est une sur cinq, en Angleterre, le concept d'énorme cuisine prédomine. D'où le pari d'ouvrir des magasins consacrés aux placards et rangements sur mesure tout en respectant la règle de base : chaque consommateur est unique !
Schmidt Groupe in figures*

- 1,534 employees;
- 7,500 collaborators worldwide;
- €472 million turnover;
- €1.5 billion turnover for the whole network;
- 5th European manufacturer;
- 15% of the turnover from exports;
- 667 shops in our target countries, Spain, Germany, Italy, Benelux, Switzerland, United-Kingdom;
- More than 40 shops in other countries (Overseas French Territories, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Russia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey, Lebanon, Mauritius, South Africa) and one shop in Australia;
- An export turnover growth of 25% in two years with significant increases in Spain (+40%) and the United-Kingdom (+140%);

- Soon 6 factories (Liépvre, Sélestat (U1, U2 and U3), Berghem (EMK) in Alsace, Türkismühle (Germany));
- 175,000 sq. m, roofed work surface;
- 718 shops;
- 30,000 data per kitchen;
- 100,000 kitchens per year;
- 120 trucks per day;
- 2,000 suppliers;
- More than €40 million invested annually;

- China: 500 shops; 1,200 employees; registered office Guangzhou (Canton), factory at Ningxi (65,000 sq. m.), 300 kitchens per day.

* 2016 figures.
Are your father’s principles still applied today?
If I think of the very first principle: “the asset is human beings”, I can say that nothing has changed. It’s still true today. But we must stay vigilant, maintain the links between the teams and know how to remain humble in a group in constant mutation.

How can one remain the best in a constantly moving world?
By trusting the teams. It’s up to all our collaborators to take the right decisions. We have to remain agile, straightforward, daring, taking pleasure and being enterprising.

What background do you want to leave your daughters?
I would like them to understand that the life of the enterprise is also the history of a great adventure. One has to be enthusiastic and manage with pleasure, if not, it’s better to do something else. There’s no question of it becoming an obligation.

Being a leading woman in the business world?
That’s not the point. One has to try to keep time for oneself, family and friends.
More automation, more personalized products and innovative services. Schmidt Groupe proposes the best offer on the market, recalled Anne Leitzgen at the last Euroforum. We aim to promote French art of living throughout the world and that of living and working happily together in the Schmidt Groupe ‘extended enterprise’.

The Group is pursuing its strong investment policy. In U3, which will be the highest automated furniture factory in the world. In the exclusive manufacture of products designed to maximize space. In customer relations, with 3000 sales staff and as many installers.

Schmidt Groupe takes a further step towards customers. “Good Services is Marketing” meets the expectations of the network (Employer Pact, Consumer Connect and Client Service Management).

And Schmidt is maximizing space with its design ranges: Modern Nature, Elegance and Country Spirit.

The range of products and services is enriched. Cuisinella proposes 4 styles inspired by contemporary life-styles: Archi Graphic, New Nature, Bohemian Folk and Industrial Workshop.

Cuisinella “industrial workshop” style kitchen

Schmidt clean-line bathroom

The “Be Happy” wall decorated by all the participants

The 3 factories in Sélestat, an exceptional industrial tool

Tens of flashbulbs greet those coming up the stairs

Discovering new goods, ideas

A real discovery of Schmidt and Cuisinella innovation

After the vision of 2025 and the good figures it’s time to relax

Anne Leitzgen
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Text compilation: Caton Production (drafting) – CarnetsdeVie® (rewriting and corrections)

Translation: David Mardell (English version) – Gisela Wassmuth (German version)

Graphic design and realization: ReCréation and CarnetsdeVie®

Daniel Gerhardt – Candice Hahn – Agnès Lafaurie – Christophe Kuntzmann

Printing: OTT Imprimeurs - France

Photo credits:
Cover: Schmidt Groupe photos ; Anne-Hélène Despois for Schmidt Groupe: pages 8, 9;
Daniel Millot for Schmidt Groupe: pages 59 to 61; Christian Admin for Schmidt Groupe: page 17;
Adobe Stock: pages 20, 23, 25, 26; Fotolia: pages 21, 30; Blum: page 79; Eco Cuisines Epinal: page 53;
Go Cuisines Audincourt: page 53; Cuisinella Sélestat: page 69; Schmidt Epinal: page 105;
SIM engraving deposited at the Busim: page 70; Schmidt Groupe: archive photos, documents, portraits and production plants: pages 6 to 7, 10 to 17, 24 to 35, 37 to 80, 120; Kris Macotta: page 117.

We extend our warm thanks to Antonia, Caroline and Anne Leitzgen, Hubertus Kirchen, Geneviève Nibel, Jean-Lin Gini, Julie Ritter, Jean-Marie Schwab and Sylvie Zimmermann who were all strongly involved in finding information and documentary material. We thank Jean-Claude Armspach, Laurent Balloni, Marie Bascioni, Marie-Clare Brunckel, Pauline Borg, Jean-Pierre Della, Mr Dubois, Philippe Faltot, Maryline Frey, Gilles Godart, Jacques Haas, Boris Herrmann, Luis Jimenez, Stéphanie Keller, Aloysine Kempf, Aude Kubishy, Valentinien Martens, Lina Masson, Bernand Muller, Olivier Philippe, Frédéric Protat, Aurélie Resfieren, Jean-Marie Schwartz, Michel Saouil, Wolfgang Thorwarth, Rains Uhl, Patrick Wehler, and David Bouvier, archivist of the Liépvre Municipality (archive photos from the book : “Liépvre , Cradle of the Valley.”)

We also extend thanks for their precious collaboration to all those who took part in interviews and appear in this publication: Géraldine Andres, Stéphanie Binner, Gerhard E. Blum, Jean-Thierry Catrice, Patrice Casenave, Anita Dellbessi, François Dumoulin, Patrick Fabre, Yann Farin, Jürgen Fries, Ulrike Hanes, Sylvie Harris, Fabienne Huber, Arnaud Hubach, Germain Klein, Jean-Luc Klein, Fabrice Lalzace, Elfi Moller, Oliver Oftner, Franck Ostertag, Hans-Jürgen Deier and Horst Stelpan, Eberhard Thies.

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April 2017 - France
Since its conception, in 1934, Schmidt Groupe has seen itself as an Extended Enterprise. Now one of the world’s leading manufacturers and suppliers of furniture, Schmidt Groupe is a unique ecosystem, giving its wealth of experience to customers, from conception, through manufacturing and delivery to installation of the finished product, both at home and internationally.

Since the beginning, Schmidt Groupe has grown by combining industrial and commercial excellence, building up sales networks comprising both partners & dealers, and thereby developing exceptionally close relations with its clients. The whole network is geared towards the consumer, and is driven by their passion for the business. Everyone involved is an ambassador of the brand, with expert knowledge and training. With over 7,000 colleagues throughout the world, Schmidt Groupe is first and foremost human energy.