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Oska: No mass production but individual fashion

The German fashion label Oska for women and men places an emphasis on individual fashion away from the mainstream and short-lived trends. 10 retail partners in Austria are just the beginning.

“Oska offers no mass production. Nor will it do so in the future. We see great opportunities for our products. The market for individual fashion is growing from a niche into a segment”, explains PR Manager Michael Spang about the Oska philosophy. Individual fashion – this rests on three terms: continuity in the form of clear and simple fits, unchanging distinctive styling as well as individuality through sophisticated fabrics and details. Oska aims to address men and women who have found their style and are looking for fashion away from the mainstream. Still, the desired continuity of this fashion niche holds challenges: the collection should be constant, but identifiable by season. Oska designers Stefanie Schmitz (womenswear) and Daniela di Donato (menswear) therefore perform a balancing act between tradition and innovation from one season to the next. Twice a year collections are presented like chapters of a continuing story. Important models are maintained. Basic colours can span over seasons and fit into the concepts of past and future collections.

You will never find skin-tight clothes at Oska, or “sacklike monsters” for that matter - instead it is the fashionably dressed cosiness in between those two – comfortable fits which do justice to any type of figure. Details, sophisticated materials, an exclusive look and distinctive structures provide the accents. Washability, colour fastness and shrinking resistance are of prime importance.

Most of the collection is produced in the Czech affiliate Pro Len. “About one sixth of the production volume is manufactured in China. There we can find exciting materials which are difficult to get in Europe – for example special quality leather, hemp and silk.” Oska’s prices are in the medium range. Purchase prices for women's trousers, for example, are between € 32 and € 68, for men's trousers between € 27 and € 67.

1000 dealers in 20 countries

The label, which was established near Munich in 1997, enjoys great demand. Between 1999 and 2005 the turnover increased eightfold to € 22.6 million. Overall there has been an average annual growth of 47 %. Last year, about 500,000 individual items were shipped to 1000 dealers in 20 countries. The sales ratio of womenswear to menswear is 90:10. A total of 75 % of the turnover is generated abroad, 40 % of which is in England, the most important market.

In Austria, Oska serves 10 customers at present. “Austria is a market which we want to expand. We are looking for partners who understand our product and philosophy and who are interested in working together long-term”, says Michael Spang. The Viennese retailer Kati Koller will start offering the Oska women's line in her shop “Fassion” at Bauernmarkt from autumn 2006. “If the label is well received, I can imagine selling only Oska in the shop – in that case, of course, I would take menswear as well.” Oska has already gained retail experience in their own shops in Berlin and Munich. In the Munich shop in Fünf Höfe 90 square metres earn € 1.6 m annually with

womenswear and menswear. "That is a turnover of more than € 17,000 per square metre", explains Spang. More shops are planned: a large womenswear shop and a small menswear shop in Hamburg, another menswear shop in Berlin Mitte. Oska also wants to expand internationally. "We're opening a womenswear shop in London. In the upmarket department store Selfridges the first shop-within-a-shop is being built". In New York the company is also looking for a suitable location.

Austrians on Board

Of the company's three founders, only Helmut Bayer remains - since 2005 he has been the majority shareholder of Oska GmbH. Fonds Invest aG of Raiffeisenlandesbank Oberösterreich has recently come on board Oska with an investment of 5 %. "This partnership developed from previously existing personal contacts. The chemistry is right and the bank is convinced of our company's vision. Helmut Bayer can buy back his shares any time", says Michael Spang.

An expansion of the product portfolio by introducing a homewear collection might be the next step. Shoes and jewellery might be taken up. In order to be able to react quicker to the market's demands, the stock is being improved and enlarged. "We are going to focus more on marketing in the future. By stepping up advertising activities we intend to increase brand awareness." With these activities, Helmut Bayer wants Oska to make the breakthrough from being a label to being a brand – as has already happened in some parts of England.