

9/22/2015 @ 8:00AM

Great Minds On Music: Hans-Christian Schwingen, Chief Brand Officer At Deutsche Telekom

As Senior Vice President of Brand Strategy and Marketing Communications at Deutsche Telekom, Hans-Christian Schwingen has been responsible for brand strategy and marketing communications at Deutsche Telekom since October 2007. In 2010, the prestigious trade publication CAMPAIGN added Schwingen to its Global Power List for his systematic positioning of the company as an emotionally charged brand ("Life is for sharing"). In 2011, Deutsche Telekom won the brand award for Best Brand Relaunch.

From 1999 to 2007, Hans-Christian Schwingen was Head of Marketing Communication at Audi AG, where he was responsible for the Audi brand in areas of advertising, customer

and retail marketing, trade fairs and events, and sponsorship and product placement. Prior to this, he worked for Springer & Jacoby from 1990 to 1999 as a unit managing director and member of the managing board.

Uli Reese, an award-winning audio branding strategist and President of iV2, sat down with Schwingen to talk about the importance of music in branding. The interview forms part of a series, due to be published as a book titled "Great Minds on Music, Brands, and Behavior." The project also serves as Reese's thesis research for an executive MBA at [The Berlin School of Creative Leadership](#).



(OLIVER BERG/AFP/Getty Images)

Reese: Deutsche Telekom is one of the strongest audio brands worldwide. Do you believe that music can change consumer behavior?

Schwingen: Yes, absolutely. I can prove it, in fact. For the 20th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009, we created the “Choir Without Borders” featuring Paul Potts at the train station in Leipzig, and we included thousands of bystanders in a [flash mob-like fashion](#). It was our way of launching a fresh interpretation of our brand. “Life is for sharing.” The goal was to breathe new life into the brand and explain to people what [Deutsche Telekom](#) really stands for.

Reese: Many of your competitors don’t have distinctive audio identities. But Deutsche Telekom has a voice. It’s not just your audio logo that has a trust-building effect on people through its long-term consistency – it’s your entire sonic presence that you have built with initiatives like the choir featuring Paul Potts. It’s all very congruent.

Schwingen: At the same time, we try to stay flexible, of course, and use different variations of our audio logo, for example.

Reese: You’re flexible, but still recognizable. How do you do that – do you follow a clearly defined audio style guide?

Schwingen: Yes. In that respect, we keep the brand on a very short leash... Anyone can put a popular song on a TV commercial to try and make it into the charts, thereby shooting for an additional word-of-mouth-effect. We try to approach the entire thing a little differently. We often put music in the center of the attention. If possible, we try to make music a major ingredient of our brand communication. The [“Choir Without Borders”](#) I mentioned earlier is a good example for that. We invited thousands of people to join the choir spontaneously – but at its core, it was really all about our brand message, about [“Life is for sharing.”](#) Another example was a karaoke event we staged on Trafalgar Square in London

featuring the artist Pink. Or Katy Perry’s music video for [“Fireworks,”](#) where we cast 250 young participants from all over Europe to be extras at the shoot. Or the online choir [“A Million Voices”](#) featuring Thomas D. The brand Telekom offers a participatory element. It’s often said that brands should enter a dialogue with their consumers, but let’s be honest: Who wants to have a dialogue with us? You have a platform, and either you make the best of it, or you don’t.



(Photo by Alberto E. Rodriguez/Getty Images)

Reese: So music really is a fundamental part of your brand strategy. But how come the company is so open for that?

Schwingen: How come? We just really want it. I believe that if you want to trigger a certain emotion, audio is a much better tool than video. After all, why can I enjoy listening to a song over and over and over again, when I get bored after watching a film a couple of times? I listen to a piece of music, and I immediately have images in my head. If we discuss a new project, one of the first things we think about is the music. We never say, “Look, just finish editing the video first and don’t spend all the money on that, because at the end we need to

slab some sort of music on it.” We don’t think that way. Music is very important to us.

Reese: You’re part of maybe 5 percent of all brands who think that way. Businesses completely underestimate and undervalue the effectiveness of audio branding. Look at marketing budgets: Only a very small portion is dedicated to audio. Which is surprising, seeing as a recent Millward Brown study shows that close to half of the effect of an audiovisual campaign is sound and music.

Schwingen: It’s a people’s business. It just really depends on who is in the driver’s seat. I don’t want to take center stage here, but I think I have managed to get the people around me to believe in the effectiveness of music. It’s all about a certain attitude – either you have it or you don’t. For me music is part of life. I’ve played the piano for 13 years.



A T-Mobile store is shown, Friday, Oct. 19, 2012 in New York. T-Mobile is a unit of Deutsche Telekom AG. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

Reese: So you agree with me when I say that many German (and global) brands are very inconsistent when it comes to audio?

Schwingen: Yes. Music is often the fifth wheel.

Reese: Do you ever analyze the return on investment of music in your brand communication?

Schwingen: Not music specifically, but we do analyze the brand factor. We interviewed 20,407 people from all of Europe and found out that respondents who really understood our brand concept “Life is for sharing.” were 3.9 times more likely to pick our brand over others. We have defined our brand mission. Telekom is not just a company that provides society with infrastructure, with networks, bits and bytes. We really want to be seen as a trustworthy partner in people’s lives. It’s our goal to make people understand we want to enrich their lives and make things easier for them. And we’re on the right way. Only last week [Brand Finance published the Global 500](#), and the survey showed that we’ve reached the highest brand value in all of our history. We’re the second most valuable German brand, after BMW. Even our audio logo has an average recall rate of 60% in all our markets. It’s a fundamental asset of our brand.



Photographer: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg

Reese: A lot of brands want a logo like yours – but the question is always whether they have the actual discipline to implement and use the logo like you do. How come Telekom is so disciplined? How do you make sure the branding strategy is being followed worldwide – for example with regard to your audio logo?

Schwingen: We have clearly defined licensing agreements that determine the use of the logo. We keep a short leash when it comes to our instructions and a long leash when it comes to the execution. And we also have veto power should things not go the way we want them to. We deliver the ideas, and the execution is up to the individual markets.

Reese: Can you talk a little bit about your decision-making process?

Schwingen: We follow a clear guideline of six so-called “creative commandments.” They’re all questions that we ask ourselves before we kick off a new project. The ideas we come up with have to match our values and have to have an impact. Is the idea based on creating or enriching a memorable moment? Is sharing a natural element of the experience? Does the communication feel authentic? Does it provide an enabling role for the brand and the products that are being featured? Can the idea be executed through the required channels to guarantee an appropriate production value? And, maybe most importantly, are you proud of the creative, so that you’d recommend it to others? Quite a lot of brands offer haptic products, things you can touch – but what we sell is “hot air,” at the end of the day. How can you turn hot air into something you can touch? You have to stage it, create an experience around it. It’s my responsibility to show people that we’re more than a mere commodity, that there’s a good reason why we’re in people’s lives – that we have a true *raison d'être*.

Reese: How do you pick good ideas? You have a very talented team that constantly gives you input. Out of 50 ideas on your desk, how do you know which one will be the next big hit?

Schwingen: I don’t think there is any kind of market research methodology that could help me discern when an idea is still in the making. In that instance, we tend to trust our gut instinct to decide whether we go for something or not. It’s part intuition and part expertise.

Reese: But there has to be more to it. Your decisions have increased Telekom’s brand value substantially. Return on investment isn’t always calculated in hard cash, but in click rates, for example, or in purchase intent factors.

Schwingen: Well, we tend to give our input, and if that input isn’t taken to heart at every touch point, all the way to our customer service agents – if the value-added chain is interrupted at any point – we’ll know. We measure the “brand fit” factor. And if that drops at any point, our alarm bells start ringing. I wouldn’t be able to tell you how much our revenue decreases if the “brand fit” dropped by three percent. For me, the mentioned factor 3.9 is decisive. And it’s a great tool to have when we’re dealing with our sales department – they’re the ones who want hard facts.

Reese: A lot of executives tell me how much they appreciate music, but at the same time, they don’t really make it their priority in branding, and that’s also due to the fact that they can’t measure the return on investment on music in particular.

Schwingen: We’re in a lucky position at Telekom. We even have our own International music platform called Electronic Beats as well as our Street Gigs in Germany, through which we’ve established our own music authority. It goes beyond advertising or sponsoring – it’s music marketing. We always try to live up to our aspirations of giving music a place in branding in the most meaningful way possible. And there’s a universe of possibilities out there of going about it.

GUEST POST WRITTEN BY
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