

Leads United – LEWIS PR Belgium:

how the invisible power of being “united” works on all fronts

*Leading communication agency Leads United specialises in the use of creative and innovative strategies to position client companies, along with their brands and business lines, in the minds of target audiences. It does so by using the talents of multi-disciplinary teams in four core areas of expertise: media relations, internal communication, crisis communication and online communication.*

*From the new consultant just starting in the job to the highly experienced adviser, everyone at Leads United is focused on using their talents as dynamically as possible for their clients to be able to expect – and enjoy – the best results. Bringing all that talent together into close teamwork is the secret at the heart of Leads United’s success.*

*The idea that, less than 20 years after its beginnings, the agency would become a leading player in the field and would eventually form part of the worldwide LEWIS PR group was something that the company’s founder, Dian Wahlen, could not have envisaged in the earliest days of her business adventure. What she did know was that she had begun something that she did not want to continue doing on her own: her core premise for the business has always been that ‘together’ works better than ‘alone’. So it is little wonder that the idea of unity runs as a constant thread throughout the story of Leads United.*

Dian’s father was the owner of a 150-person-strong factory, manufacturing rubber bands, so it can safely be said that Dian had the spirit of entrepreneurship in her blood from an early age. And so, one day, after gaining her experience in the corporate world as a communication executive, she decided to start up her own agency. In her line of work, she had found existing agencies to be too stuffy, lacking in creativity and disappointingly low on direct initiative. What she had in mind was the creation of a totally different type of agency – and she decided that the time was ripe for it.

But she didn’t want to start a business alone – not least because she hated the administrative work it brings with it. “No problem,” said her husband Erwin, who was also an

enterprising company manager. “I’ll do it.” And so it was that the twosome began working out of a room in their house, specially converted into an office.

After a brainstorming session with friends, the idea of cooperation, of ‘working together to build success’ – with new business prospects, clients, journalists and soon perhaps with other staff – grew to become an essential element of the fledgling company. And working with her own approach and creative tools, Dian soon generated her first leads, based on her own go-getting view of how communication should work. From this founding proposition came the company name: ‘Leads United’.

The reputation of the new agency very quickly began to grow in increasingly wide and impressive circles. The list of clients grew longer, including well-known names from the technology sector – clients that were to remain with Leads United for many years. It wasn’t long before Dian had to find a place in her home office for the company’s first employee. By the time there were five of them on board and the business part of their house was threatening to burst its seams, Dian and Erwin decided to start looking for a ‘real’ office.

At the new premises, in the Kempen borough of Zandhoven, the setting proved to be a vast improvement – and undeniably more professional.

Just as they had been on Day One of their business, Dian and Erwin were acutely aware of the importance of attracting the ‘right people’ to work with them on growing the business. The administrative side was already in the capable hands of Kim, who was to develop into one of the agency’s most important mainstays over the years. And in terms of producing the right communication approach, Dian was already utilising the varied talents of an exciting and versatile mix of people.

At that stage, however, the business was still mostly focused on media relations for technology companies. But Dian and Erwin had their eye on conquering other markets – and they had already discussed these intentions with José, a Dutch lady who had worked with Dian in the past. Like Dian, she had risen from her role as a communication executive to a management position for a major bank. Her experience was just what Leads United was looking for. Over the coming months, she became an adviser to Erwin and Dian, and would then remain a key figure at Leads United for a very long time – often as an invisible partner,

but always committed to the dreams and aspirations of the people she was to meet at Leads United.

“What and where, exactly, do you want to be in 10 years’ time?” José asked Dian and Erwin at the end of the 1990s. Their answer was to bring a new, fresh wind blowing through the company.

Leads United decided to start hiring professionals with competencies and experience in a wide range of business areas. New clients included companies in the lifestyle sector, diversifying Leads United’s reach even further. Cans of hair lacquer and shoes suddenly started appearing around the office, together with computer screens and PC games, all waiting for a particular event or press campaign to happen. Government departments were also permanently camped out at Leads United, as the new team enthusiastically got to grips with all sorts of client specs and briefs. And because the more senior staff had their own ambitions, too, José was given more and more HR-related work to do. In the end, she joined the management side of Leads United as the agency continued to grow and grow.

While José had her hands full with HR responsibilities, it was clear that the company required additional staff to handle the operating policy and emerging new disciplines. Leads United wanted to create an ‘internal communication’ and ‘crisis communication’ offering – both were areas of business increasingly crying out for the agency’s attention. And then, by chance, at a seminar on crisis communication, Dian happened to meet Ingrid – a woman with whom she had studied and who already had a successful career to her name, but who was now looking for a new challenge. And, from within Leads United itself, came Miek, a recent appointment who was involved in the agency’s growth. Beginning in 2006, therefore, the three women and José together formed a management team for Leads United that was both versatile and mutually complementary. Once again, the ‘United’ motif had proven itself to be the beating heart of the agency.

It was an inspirational time for the new management team which continued to head enthusiastically down the diverse, new business roads that were constantly opening up for the agency. For Leads United, now relocated to Aartselaar, was becoming increasingly influential in every area of business. Career planning, training and personal development plans went hand-in-hand with Leads United’s broader offerings for clients. And the first

successfully supported crisis projects (in the technology and chemicals industries) immediately thrust Leads United into the spotlight as a specialist in all-round issue management and crisis communication.

Soon, internal communication also started to become a greater priority for clients. And so the agency was able to profile its new expertise in this area, and in a widening range of sectors, including industrial manufacturing and leisure. And when it came to the latest trend in the marketplace in recent years – social media – the management team was well-positioned to recruit a guru in the field, a person with a reputation as a pioneer in the blogosphere.

The agency's new offering, new sectors and new talent – which now included French-language specialists – seamlessly integrated into the company's ongoing history. People at Leads United worked hard, but at the same time were well rewarded – and, especially, had lots of fun. The Leads United corporate culture was well known for being light-hearted, yet businesslike. It was a label that applied to its external relations as well as its internal ones, and became a definitive “house style” that even extended to the company cars.

In the summer of 2007, Dian was appointed president of the Belgian Public Relation Consultants Association (BPRCA). At the same time, in conjunction with Erwin and her colleagues in the management team, she increasingly began giving thought to the ‘how’ of the business's next big step: internationalisation. It was something she wanted to make a reality in the following year.

And so 2008 arrived. Leads United, now 15 years young, had 21 consultants by this stage and approximately 60 clients – and a faithful company dog answering to the name ‘Doenix’ (‘Do Nothing’). The agency, bursting with vitality, celebrated its birthday with a tremendous event.

And then came the autumn...

In their search for ways to take the company international, Dian and Erwin had been in contact with LEWIS PR. It was an encounter that had immediately highlighted the many areas of common approach between the Belgian agency and the worldwide group. Particularly in its culture and sense of progressiveness, LEWIS PR very much appeared to be

Leads United's soulmate. Discussions between the two parties rapidly pointed to practical cooperation, and a decision was taken to sit down together in London and hammer out a deal. And so it was that, in the very best of spirits, Dian, Erwin and José found themselves around the negotiating table with this international public relations group. They were on the brink of the next chapter in their business adventure ... or so they thought. For while our Leads United trio and the senior management team at LEWIS PR immersed their heads in the figures, outside, the financial markets went crashing through the floor.

The crisis that marked the beginning of the century – the most serious that the financial world had seen in 80 years – was in full swing, and one catastrophic report followed another on the plasma screens in the hallways of the LEWIS office. Discussions were suspended. The deal appeared to be off.

And Leads United suddenly had other priorities; an urgent and harsh reality had taken hold. It took no time at all for the proportions of the crisis to become apparent. Projects were blown out of the water; contracts already underway were cancelled; monthly assignments became quarterly assignments; and the business pipeline ran dry. For the first time in its existence, Leads United found itself in a battle with an enemy that was unknown, unpredictable and not to be underestimated.

Gone was the prospect of going international. Now, it was all about saving the ship and keeping it afloat – something that would only be possible if part of crew was sadly let go. For Dian, it was the most painful decision of her career ever – indeed, something that the whole management team had great difficulty dealing with. Together, they decided to tackle the crisis head-on by taking a measure that would cut deep, but cut only once: no drip-drip redundancies, but the wholesale dismissal of a fifth of the group's headcount. 'Short and sharp' was the message. And from the storm, a slimmed-down, healthy Leads United had to emerge, with its main strengths combined to deal with any new challenges.

No matter how hard it was for the agency's staff to accept, each of them realised the seriousness of the situation and understood that such action was unavoidable. The priority had to be to survive and stay healthy; to ensure the future; and, especially, to keep providing the same quality of creative, efficient service that its clients had always known. The workload was redistributed, with strategic thinkers rolling up their sleeves to do the 'grunt

work' and the 'doers' consciously involved in the strategic thinking. The new business lines, such as online communication, were no longer provided by a subsidiary, but became fully integrated into the day-to-day activities at Leads United.

This new, health-focused policy turned out to be the right choice. Staff were 'united' in achieving their objectives and the winning of new clients was an effort shared right across the group. Although the crisis was still fresh in everyone's mind, it took just six months for Leads United to be able to take a breath, as the darkest dangers appeared to have passed. Forecasts were where they needed to be and the overall atmosphere within the agency exuded a new, almost purified optimism that gave everyone fresh motivation.

Almost without knowing it, the crisis was over for Leads United. And so, while Dian and the management team had been focused mainly on getting through these difficult times, the prospect of going international once again came beckoning.

LEWIS PR had not lost sight of Leads United, either – quite the contrary. Whereas just a year previously, the major group had had a clear idea of the Belgian agency's reputation and position in the market, LEWIS PR's respect for Leads United had grown even further as a result of its tackling of the crisis. The threads of a nascent relationship were picked up and not allowed to drop a second time. In October 2009, barely one year after the global financial crisis had struck, Leads United, healthier than ever, was standing with LEWIS PR on the brink of a whole new adventure.

*Today, the pioneers and staff of the former Leads United and LEWIS PR Belgium stand 'united', ready for their clients, their business partners and anyone else with whom they may be working. The agency's proactive, quality-based approach, its creative power and its innovative offering are still the great strengths that make it stand out from its competitors. Now, more than ever, the will to succeed together remains the driving force behind the new LEWIS PR Belgium, which is able to look forward to a promising future with confidence and energy.*