



AN INTERVIEW WITH ULRICH KELLERER

PREMIERE FASHION EXPERT LEARNS THE DEEPER MEANING OF SUCCESS

PERFORMANCE: Why did you choose fashion as a career, and how did you get started in that industry?

ULRICH: I came to it very naturally thirty-five years ago. My father's parents owned a farm south of Munich, Germany where I lived until I was four years old. Even back then, I would change clothes three times a day – and everyone thought it was unusual and wondered how I could be part of this farm family. That desire to be fashionable continued in school when I also changed three times a day – one outfit for school, another for meeting a girlfriend in the afternoon, still another hanging out later with the guys. I've always been interested in fashion, and was always attracted by the clothes worn by beautiful women in the fashion world. After attending high school in Rosenheim, I moved to a small city in France, where I got a good job for a food company. But I didn't feel comfortable with all of the ingredients they put in the items they sold. I made good money, but I didn't sleep well at night.

Everyone thought I was crazy to give up a good job and a nice apartment, but I took the risk and searched for other employment. A company called Marc O'Polo was looking for new salesmen for their Italian brand *Mason's*. I started there at age twenty and over the next fourteen years, worked my way up to Sales and Product-Manager and finally CEO and shareholder. I have just always been very strong at sales.

PERFORMANCE: Earlier in your life and career, how did you define success? How has that definition changed over the years?

ULRICH: My perspectives about life and success were shaped by many different personal experiences at an early age. When I started working for Marc O'Polo during the time many of my friends were still at University, I thought I had it all. I was driving a BMW, earned a lot of money and had many girlfriends. But the reason I couldn't go to University was pretty traumatic. When I was 15, I had acute pancreatitis and was in the hospital seven times, and the following year I was in a coma and ultimately had to have a major operation. The doctors were pessimistic. They said if we do the

surgery you will live till you are forty, but if not, you will only have another two years. They wanted me to take forty-five pills every day, but I refused to take their advice, believing that if there was an ultimate plan for my life I would survive.

Fortunately, I pulled through, but even while enjoying material success in the fashion industry, I had many ups and downs with the company. I made up my mind and became both a free agent salesperson and a shareholder. At one point I got married, but it didn't work out. I thought entering the distribution side of the industry would make us rich and I could slow down, but working so many hours took its toll on the relationship. The divorce was the bitter pill I had to swallow for focusing so much on having this huge career.

Later, I married Inge and we started our own trading company, Faro Fashion, which specialized in the import of high-end Italian fashion wear. But that ultimately failed. Instead of declaring bankruptcy, I vowed to repay each of my creditors in full. From these hard experiences

and our later success as distributors of the brand *CLOSED* in Bavaria, I learned that true success results from your relationships, not from just doing well in business. Life is too precious to just care about business.

PERFORMANCE: You took over the distribution of *CLOSED* in 1998. How did you proceed in developing your business?

ULRICH: When we started, the brand was a rock bottom, and we changed the distribution model in Bavaria. But despite previous challenges, I had always known that if I commit to the success of a company, I will follow through on that and stick with it for a long time. Slowly but surely, we built a good team and began developing the brand. Customers believed in us and our relationship was more like family and friends. In ten years we took revenues from 900 Euro to nearly 5 million. We have increased the international visibility for the brand and I'm pleased that our ethical standards ensured that customers knew we would never cheat them.

PERFORMANCE: Then, a few years ago, even as you were enjoying the success

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of the company, you experienced a powerful change in your personal life that sparked new passion outside the business realm.

ULRICH: Three years ago, my mother had an operation that failed and left her paralyzed. When she entered a nursing home for the first time, it led to real change in my life. While Inge, my wife, was still taking care of the distribution of *CLOSED* ladies' collection, I left my side of the business to a young man who was paid directly by the company's main office in Hamburg. I dedicated myself to taking care of my mother and volunteered to participate in many of the nursing home's events like Mardi Gras parties and Oktoberfest to spend more time with her during the phase of her adjustment. I also brought food and coffee to her elderly peers, and came up with the idea of preparing stories to read to them every Monday. Pretty soon, although my mom became a vocal critic of some of my readings, it became the favorite hour of the week for many of them.

I learned about the immense power and emotional impact of storytelling, which inspired my later writing endeavors and my ultimate goal now of succeeding in that area.

PERFORMANCE: During this time *CLOSED* appointed you as their official fashion broker and location scout.

ULRICH: I created a new contract with the company, dealing with the future of fashion, which is in retail stores, franchised shops and online business and other outlets. I deal with the retail people who run our shops, and choose the right franchise partners. These shops only have the *CLOSED* brand. It's more interesting work for me, and the main thing is to motivate people to form franchise partnerships. As a veteran salesperson myself, I'm aware that success in building a franchise store is based on having empathy and understanding for a customer. Thus I wanted to create these partnerships with people who will know the right way to talk to them, and understand the value of common courtesy and the fact that customers don't like pushy salespersons. That's why I prefer to work with people who will understand the deep commitment it takes to succeed.

PERFORMANCE: In line with those qualities, what are some of the keys to being successful overall in the fashion industry?

ULRICH: You have to love fashion and identify with your product. If you don't like the collections you're working with, you can't convince customers of their value. There are some brands people have a momentary interest in, but if you work with long-existing brands that succeed through many seasons, you'll be motivated to sell them, and your customers will understand that value and feel excitement. With every customer, building trust is what counts most. If people come into your showroom, the most important thing is that you create an atmosphere in which you're both the leader and team player, treating everyone with respect. My favorite saying is, "Your work time is your life time."

Further, please be more honest. Not every item is super, so don't tell your customer it is. The company wants you to sell everything they have, but your obligation is to lead the customer through the collection to find what they need. You should focus on taking care of them. If you are only aiming for the money, and your choices make them unhappy, that's not going to be good for anybody.

PERFORMANCE: Let's get back to your volunteer work with the nursing home your mother lived in. How did those experiences lead to your desire to connect with Jack Canfield of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* fame, who invited you to be a contributing author in his book *The Soul of Success*? I love the name of your chapter, "It's All About Fashion - There is no second chance for your first impression!" It connects so perfectly and metaphorically with your career in the fashion world.

ULRICH: There's a lot of irony in this. Originally I started reading at the nursing home for a selfish reason because I thought it would help my mother get the private room she wanted. When she passed away, they assumed I would stop doing charity work, but I realized that I loved reading to these folks too much to stop. I turned into a wonderful source for many of my readings: those small beautiful stories in some of Jack Canfield's *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. I knew they wanted to hear funny,

uplifting stories. Connecting with these people created a complete transformation in me. For thirty-five years, I had been making people look good on the outside. Now, all that mattered was helping people feel good on the inside. I came to Philadelphia in 2012 to attend a Bestseller Blueprint Seminar with Jack Canfield and marketing expert Steve Harrison. Jack's story really inspired me. He was refused 140 times by publishers and now he has sold over 500 million books!

When I met him for the first time, I jokingly told him I would not have come all the way to Philadelphia had I known he had just done a seminar in Heidelberg. He kindly invited me to a lunch with some very prominent people free of charge. He later told me that a single book isn't as effective as creating a series like he did.

This was the start of my book, "It's All About Fashion – There is no second chance for your first impression!" which is still a work in progress. The chapter in Jack's book with the same title is the basic text part for that project.

PERFORMANCE: What is the essential point that is communicated in the chapter – and ultimately, the book?

ULRICH: It's about the idea that there is no second chance to create that first impression. In less than one second, we decide whether we like or not. In fashion, it's all about judging by appearances and what we're wearing. But the truth of who we are goes deeper than that. Maybe those first impressions are wrong, and that guy we thought we didn't like from the start turns out to be a nice guy.

We're trained to hide behind the products we have, the cars, watches and fancy stuff, but I want people to understand that we're more than just what people see on the surface. I talk about the ways fashion can be a strong tool in our ultimate self-expression, and how to identify the type of person you are. So I talk about things on the outside and how they connect with what is on the inside – and how to find your own style.

My goal now is to inspire and motivate people

I make some major statements at the end of the chapter: Live here and now! You can achieve anything with a pinch of humor. Those who do not live authentically as themselves will run after every trend forever. On a personal level, these writings are part of my desire to start a second life for myself with a new career beyond the fashion industry – finding new ways to help people, just as everyone can do something to make the world a better place.

For years I gave money to global organizations like Greenpeace, and that's great, but the whole nursing home experience made me realize we can accomplish a lot right in our own neighborhood. These elderly folks have given me so much just by listening. It will be my honor to tell some of their stories in my next book.

PERFORMANCE: It sounds like you are finding new ways to define success for yourself outside the industry you are best known for.

ULRICH: My goal now is to inspire and motivate people. I recently thought back to when I was sixteen and so sick from pancreatitis. I just wanted to live a normal life. I stopped writing down my dreams because I felt I might not live long enough to realize them. But that inner voice came back two years ago. It told me that I had been through so many things and I could use those experiences to help people. I was told I would not survive. All of my family members, including my brothers have passed away. Nobody on my father's side of the family ever lived longer than 54 years. There's no time like the present, and I'm on a mission to motivate people to not forget their dreams, even if they're sick or broke or facing any other sort of adversity.

I want to share my message that everyone should do something to make the world a better place. I'm so blessed with a loving wife and business partner and good friends. And embarking on these creative endeavors, I have met so many incredible people I would never have met in the fashion industry. Rather than talking over and over about the next collection in London, Paris or Milan, I'm talking about things of greater significance to me.

ABOUT ULRICH



After finishing high school, Ulrich Kellerer went to work for six months in France and travelling became his passion. Being at Fashion Fairs in Italy-Florence, France-Paris, Berlin, Dusseldorf and Munich in Germany, he got well-known in his fashion field.

Ulrich started his career in the fashion business in the early 80's, when he took a sales position at Marc O'Polo and Mason's. His strong selling skills and tenacious personality quickly made him Sales and Product Manager, and finally CEO and shareholder of the company Mason's.

He then started his own trading company called Faro Fashion together with his wife as a partner. Faro Fashion specialized in the import of high-end Italian fashion wear.

In 1998, Ulrich and his wife Inge and their Team took over the distribution of the brand CLOSED in Bavaria, Germany, which they have done for more than 17 years now.

Ulrich Kellerer advises his clients on the latest fashion styles and trends. Most recently CLOSED, a leading European fashion company for women's and men's sportswear, appointed him their official fashion broker and location scout.

American celebrities and trendsetters, such as Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Patrick Dempsey, Sarah Jessica Parker, Katie Holmes, Drew Barrymore, etc. have been supportive in establishing CLOSED as a recognized brand in the US.

In 2012, Ulrich came to Philadelphia to attend a seminar with Steve Harrison and met Jack Canfield for the first time. Jack recommended that he write a series of books like he did with *Chicken Soup For The Soul*. So Ulrich's first book, *It's All About Fashion*, started here.

A media summit in New York showed Ulrich how the U.S. market worked. A further meeting with Steve Harrison and Jack Canfield in Philadelphia made his second life possible, including writing books and living for a new purpose.

Since 2013, Ulrich reads for charity every week in a nursing home, where he lost his mother seven months ago.

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