



GRIMM FUTURE LOOKING BRIGHT

From small beginnings in Hamburg, Germany, Grimm Consulting has become synonymous with collaboration, quality and innovation across Europe.

Jim Banks speaks to its award-winning founder, **Björn Grimm** FCSI, about his past achievements and his vision for the future >

It began as a one-man band in Hamburg back in 2003, but today Grimm Consulting has built a team that is known for its engagement with clients and the success of its shoulder-to-shoulder approach to management consultancy that has helped many to transform their business.

Fifteen years ago, owner and founder Björn Grimm FCSI set out on his own to bring his visionary ideas to the foodservice sector's Mittelstand – medium-sized companies – for which he believed that trust, conscientiousness, individuality and professionalism were not old-fashioned values, but valuable virtues to be nurtured.

He started working with the regional branch of Deutscher Hotel- und Gaststättenverband (DEHOGA) – the German Hotel and Restaurant Association – on projects around Hamburg, but soon saw interest in his collaborative approach from across Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

To date, more than 2,000 hotel and catering businesses have benefitted from the company's consulting services, ranging from local bars to owner-managed five-star hotels. Grimm is the champion of the Mittelstand from cradle to grave.

"Our aim is to help these businesses with their core problems and improve their P&L," says Grimm. "Every business is different, so we take pride in listening to our customers and talking to them at eye level. We are not economists, but we do have years of practical experience in restaurants and hotels."

"We see similar problems coming up a lot. Everyone has an artist in the kitchen but a brilliant chef is not necessarily a brilliant economist, so we help those creative people to run their business well," he adds.

Some of the company's projects, clockwise from main picture above: Graf von Bismarck restaurant; Auberge de Temple; Grimm Consulting team; the kitchens at Graf von Bismarck; Björn Grimm. Previous page: Auberge de Temple kitchen



Trusting in the team

Over the years, Björn Grimm has built a strong team around him. While he is the boss, there is no strict hierarchy in the company and every project is the result of the combined efforts of key skill sets within the group of talented employees. In total, there are 13 people – seven full-time staff, five freelancers and one trainee – across the company's three offices in Hamburg, Lüneburg and Mallorca.

"The idea behind the company is that we are all from the industry and we love what we do," says Grimm. "Even our office is different to other consultancies. For the first contact, we invite clients to an office that has more of a lounge atmosphere. It is a much more relaxed environment in which to discuss a new project. There, they find out about our philosophy, which is totally pro-customer."



"We may charge a lot of money, but it is always a fair price for what the customer gets. We are totally transparent and we report to our clients about where their money is spent. That transparency allows us to talk openly about a project. We are not know-it-alls.

Instead we are very curious and we ask a lot of questions to find out exactly what our clients want. We take pride in building trust and confidence in our clients," he continues.

The importance of the company's team ethic was highlighted when Grimm suffered a severe illness that kept him out of the office for three months.

"It was a real crisis, but it gave me a real appreciation of my team, which supported me and my wife," he says. "No one knew how long it would take for me to return but the response from the team was overwhelming. I also had many good



wishes from clients. We did not lose a single client and it is an experience that taught me that we have the ability to deal with such things."

Values drive Grimm Consulting. The team focuses on building relationships with its clients and fostering the kind of trust that sees them stay in contact even after a project is completed.

"No contract is worth more than trust," stresses Grimm. "We are not afraid to cancel a contract if the project is not working out the way the client needs it to. That comes from the personal relationships we try to build with clients. We have no call centre and all calls are taken personally. We do not make any cold calls and we work mostly on recommendations from satisfied clients. Most of all, we have a lot of respect for our clients and their ideas."

Perhaps the clearest example of how Grimm and his colleagues try to understand a business is Mystery Cooking – an idea Grimm developed to help clients by literally getting inside

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their operations (see box, right). By placing a trained chef in the business as a new employee, there is an unprecedented opportunity to see how the kitchen and the front-of-house areas work, to find out exactly what the concerns of the staff – and, most importantly, the head chef – really are, and to see first-hand how efficiency might be improved.

"From the beginning, they meet with the staff and listen to what they need," Grimm explains. "There is always the famous cigarette break, where staff tend to talk about how they really feel. Our mystery chef is truly part of the team and shares these moments with the people who work in the restaurant."

No rotten eggs

While many consultants are eager to talk at length about their flagship projects, pointing out those for which they would >

MYSTERY COOKING

At the FCSI EAME 2018 Conference in Rotterdam, Netherlands, Björn Grimm won a special award for his services to management consultancy and to the FCSI Germany Austria division. He was also awarded the Excellence in Management Advisory award at the FCSI EAME 2017 Conference for his Mystery Cooking concept. The idea involves a chef working in a client's restaurant anonymously for a few days, looking closely at how it functions and examining everything from work processes, food ordering and kitchen equipment to staff and hygiene.

The intelligence gleaned by the chef enables the operator to rework the menu, improve food-ordering processes, increase efficiency and, consequently, raise profitability.

"For a business in the Mittelstand, there is often one problem in the kitchen – one place in which the money is burnt," says Grimm. "The kitchen has to work well and be efficient. If a client is losing money then often we have to look at the kitchen, not the service. The head chef is the manager of the kitchen but very often people will not open up to the chef or the consultant. With Mystery Cooking, the people in the kitchen often reveal that the problem is bad management rather than a bad kitchen."



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most like to be remembered, Grimm has no such desire. Whether out of modesty, or respect for his clients – all of whom have made the effort to seek his help and implement changes to make a success of their business – it's impossible to say, though it appears to be a mixture of both. "There are no rotten eggs," says Grimm, because he ensures that the relationship with the client is always clear, collaborative and built on confidence.

"There is no particular project that is a highlight," he explains. "I am proud of all of them, and I am proud of every piece of positive feedback that I get from clients. I consider it a success every time we help a client to make more money.

"Every time I see a well-run restaurant that I have worked on, it makes me happy. That is how I want to be

remembered – as someone who helped people to save their business or to make good money."

Money, however, is not the only priority. Grimm and his team believe that it is through the long-term, sustainable changes that clients truly benefit. Only by giving clients the tools to build a sustainable business will Grimm Consulting receive the recommendations that generate future business.

Success built on respect

The company succeeds on building in-depth client relationships not only because it understands both the art and the science of the foodservice industry, but also because it prizes both trust and a strict code of ethical conduct – respect the work, respect the customer, respect the customer's money – that ensures every project is tailored to the specific needs of the client.

As Grimm walks around Hamburg he is likely to bump into people he has worked with, and it always gives him pleasure to see a thriving business that he has helped to improve.

INNOVATION IS INESCAPABLE

Mystery Cooking represents an innovative approach to understanding what makes a business tick and is illustrative of Grimm's broader attitude, which encourages clients to stop waiting around for change to happen to them and instigate changes that matter.

"Innovation is our focus," Grimm says. "Change or die. That is the attitude that keeps a business moving. We often have to be more creative than the bakers, the chefs and the economists involved in a project.

"I am a very visual person and I can visualise a concept at the planning stage to bring together good ideas from other projects on which I have worked in order to visualise something entirely new."

Now, he has turned his mind to the future, which is about bringing the next generation into the industry, partly through his work with students at the Hotelfachshule Hamburg.

"It is important to give something back," he remarks. "After all, people trusted me when I was young." ■



Left: Das Dorf, a restaurant in Hamburg.
Above: Björn Grimm is also an author of publications focusing on foodservice