



Jan Breuer



MBW CEO JAN BREUER WANTS TO CREATE PRODUCTS THAT PEOPLE TRULY ENJOY

## 'PEOPLE ALWAYS REMEMBER THEIR FIRST CUDDLY TOY'

MBW's plush animals, anti-stress figures and ducks are instantly likeable: they invite you to relax for a moment and easily put a smile on the recipient's face. With three quality brands and many themed variations, the products can be tailored to the recipient's world. The company looks to the future with AI Inspiration, grain stalks as production material and softly humming robots on the production floor. Yet CEO Jan Breuer has always stayed true to his history and roots in Wanderup, near Flensburg. In 2025 MBW celebrated its 45th anniversary - a good reason to get to know the supplier better.

**J**an Breuer: "We are here in the far north of Germany. Wanderup is a small village with around 3,000 inhabitants, with the North Sea on the left, the Baltic Sea on the right and the Danish border ten minutes up the road. So we are very 'northern', but certainly not cold - and very friendly!"

### Reflectors

"I was born in Flensburg in 1983 and, for as long as I can remember, we lived in Wanderup. My parents still live here. My mother was the company's first employee. Back then it was still called MB, which stood for Monika Both. Monika and her husband Walter founded the company in 1980. The old premises were in the middle of the village: two buildings and a warehouse. Their first products were pedestrian reflectors in various shapes and images. They had spotted the item on holiday in Finland and decided it would be a good product to import. Children could pin it to their jackets and be seen more easily in the dark.

After the first steps in retail, the product also proved successful in the promotional industry. They built on that, later adding bicycle helmets, bottle openers and printed T-shirts. The stress figures, ducks and cuddly toys came later.

I was already used as a model in the catalogue, because my mother worked in finance. In 2000, at the age of sixteen, I started my apprenticeship here as an international wholesaler. I really wanted to work and became part of the sales team. I visited customers and trade fairs, meeting many wonderful people from the industry.

### *What was it like working with your mother?*

"After more than thirty years with the company, she retired in 2019. So I worked with her for a long time, even as her boss! When Monika and Walter retired in 2014, I took over MBW. For five years I was my mother's boss. Fortunately, she had no problem with that, and neither did I. It was

actually very nice to work with her, as the most reliable person in the company. At the end of every business year I invite my parents over and update them on all the news and how the year has gone."

***So you grew up with the company. Did you know right away that this was what you wanted?***

"I had applied for a few jobs, but I was still very young for many positions. Walter gave me the opportunity to do my training here and then explore the wider world. But I enjoyed it very much and was highly motivated. I learned a lot, and in 2005 I visited China and Hong Kong for the first time. There were all kinds of opportunities to see and feel on site how this industry works. I still go twice a year and we still work largely with the same people. Everything is handmade, and I respect the work of all these people."

**Village child**

"When I come back from trade fairs in big cities, I am always happy to drive into Wanderup. Old friends who have moved away sometimes ask whether I would not like to change my surroundings too... But why? I travel enough, I see a lot of the world, but this is home - walking with my dog, together with my family. I feel freer here than I would in a big city. I am a village child."

***What kind of leader are you within the company?***

"I make my decisions based on data, but also from a vision and a plan. I am creative and have good ideas. You have to be careful with that too, because you should not overwhelm your staff. It is important to me that I am not a bottleneck, but that I facilitate and support people so they can make decisions and take responsibility themselves. If I am not there, the company must be able to continue - and that works well with this team of 75 people: everyone is specialised in their own field."

***What is difficult, and what comes easily?***

"I always wanted to be a leader. It makes me happy and I cannot imagine doing anything other than leading a company. I want to develop, create and build, and I can do all of that in my position. Imagine you are a professional footballer but afraid of being in the spotlight, for example in the Allianz Arena with 70,000 spectators around you, afraid to make a mistake - then that is a handicap. But if you go all in and enjoy that visible role, it will suit you."



What I find more difficult is when people are not focused or do not really want to move forward. I want a team that goes for it and does not see obstacles everywhere. In my role as CEO, I changed the mindset in the company to become more flexible and more open. If we want to change something, we experiment. We try it out together, and I want people to be open to that. I know very well that life is more than work alone and that everyone has their own problems, whether social, work-related, family or health. And a team can help when one of those areas is not going well. I know the people well, their families and the problems that arise. My door is open. I want people to come to work in good spirits.

If I cannot solve something myself, I ask mentors for help so I can understand it better and take action if needed. Two years ago, for example, I brought in a coach and set up a new company structure with more people in responsible positions. We now have a head of operations, head of finance, head of logistics and head of business development, of which I am also part. I trust my people and

**MiniFeet**

***Can you tell us something about your brands?***

"For a long time, we did not have our own brands at MBW. The name was on every product label, but without our further details. That was because we are the first point of entry in the EU for the products, and our customers were afraid consumers would otherwise buy directly from us. When legislation changed, we had to put our name and address on the product, precisely because we are fully responsible for what we bring to market. And ultimately, distributors also do not want to be held responsible for possible mistakes on our side. From then on, we could produce our own brands. And that began with a personal story."



In 2011, my son Lasse was born and we made a stamp of his footprint. When we started selling our cuddly toys under our own brand name, it became MiniFeet, with my son's footprint as the logo. He now has shoe size 48.5... MiniFeet has grown up, and the cuddly toys still account for about half of our turnover. We also make and print clothes for the cuddly toys. Later came Schnabels, the ducks in all kinds of variations, for example for a specific profession or a special occasion or celebration. And we make Squeezies, the stress balls or stress figures in the shape of our own Mr Bert in different outfits. The anti-stress figures and ducks are largely made by hand. Today we have an enormous collection. One of my personal favourites is the Schmoozies screen cleaner - fun and useful at the same time.

Our products are friendly, safe and of very good quality. That is what we stand for. You get a smile in return, and I like that. They are also sustainable because people are not quick to throw away such a cheerful gift. In sustainability, we are constantly innovating. We are now exploring the possibility of producing 50 percent of the ducks from grain stalks and 50 percent from PVC. That brought a funny anecdote: in April I went to China with a colleague with a special package of ingredients for biobased plastic in our suitcases. We wanted to see whether we could include that in duck production. At Hong Kong airport we were picked out and checked extra carefully because, of course, they thought we were smuggling drugs... Fortunately, in the end we were allowed through."

## JCK Holding

"In 2007, owners Monika and Walter decided to sell 50 percent of the company to JCK Holding. Together with four other companies from the promotional industry - Gustav Daiber, FARE, Halfar and SND - we are part of this family holding. The big advantage is that we can work together. At trade fairs, we can promote our brands in one large stand. We are jointly developing our own ERP system and investing in AI solutions. This also gives us better access to certain brands. For example, we obtained the rights to Maya the Bee and several Sesame Street characters, such as Cookie Monster, Bert and Ernie. That is the big advantage of being part of the holding."

## *Sometimes things go less smoothly. How do you handle that?*

"In 2019 we moved into this new building, with everything we wanted and everything designed for growth: 1,100 square metres of office space and 1,100 square metres of storage, plus two additional storage locations. That was one of the highlights of my career. Then coronavirus entered the country. That was bitter. At such a moment, as a leader, you have to stay calm and focused and reassure your staff. None of our dealers were asking for our products anymore; everything was about disinfectants and face masks. So we launched the campaign 'we stay strong'. It meant that we supplied free gifts for heroes - for example in healthcare or education - who had been nominated by others. We did ask for a photo of these heroes with our product. That was a nice way to show our distributors that the products make people happy. And it changed our own mindset towards creating demand instead of simply waiting."

## *Where are your customers located?*

"Our international partners can be found all over the world. Our self-service tools make it very easy to place an order from anywhere, tailored uniquely to the company or institution in question. Through our website tools, you can mix and match to taste. For example, you can combine a cuddly toy and a T-shirt with a logo. You can not only see what the logo and print might look like, but also adjust the background so you get a better idea of how the gift can be used. It is called 'Create AI Inspiration' and you absolutely do not need any graphic talent for it. We have combined different AI tools so very good inspiration images can be created. The duck or cuddly toy and the logo are 'indexed' by AI, and based on that it creates a suitable visual environment. Customers can also easily see whether the quantities are in stock and what the final price is. The products are then brought to the production floor by robots."



**The volunteer fire brigade**

*What are your hobbies?*

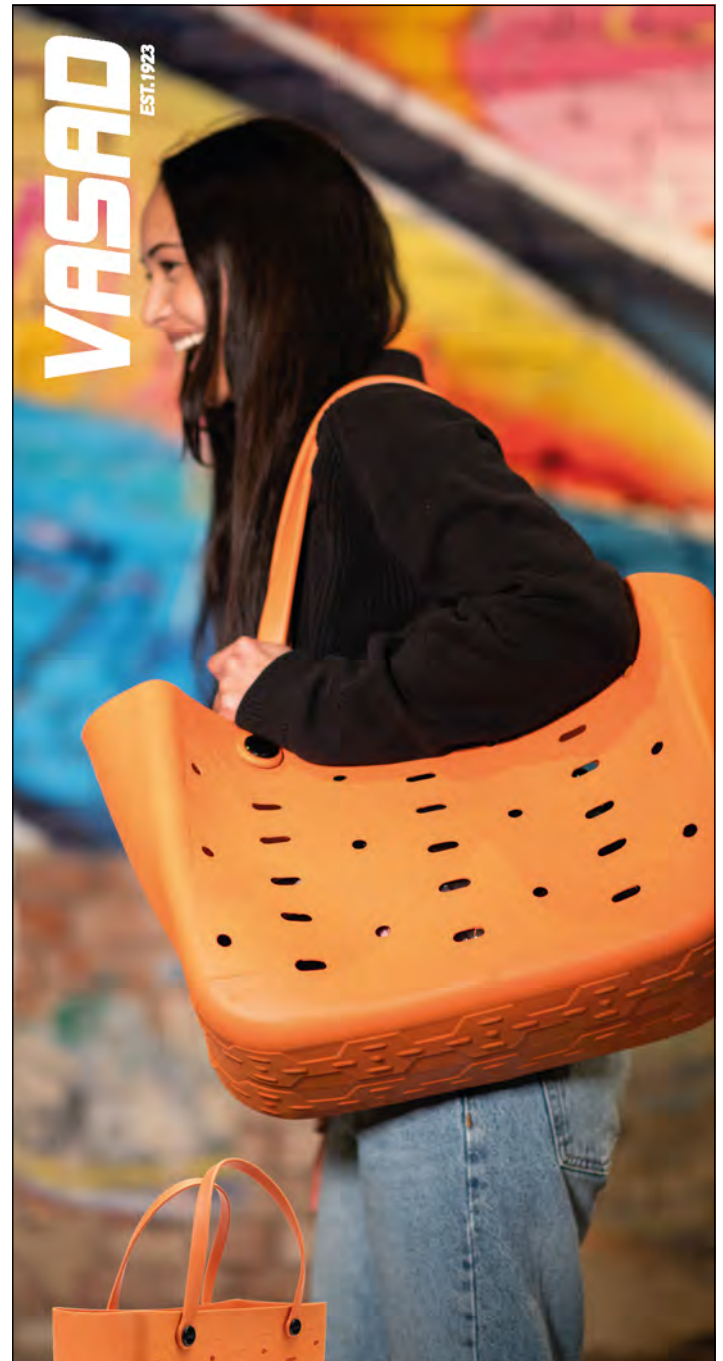
"As a child I was already involved in DJing. I loved making people happy with good music, and I still enjoy doing that. I like all kinds of music: rock, techno and Schlager. I have also played handball since my youth. It is very popular here in the north and we have some of the best clubs in the world. Team sports are good because you deal with both your own team and an opponent, and you can translate that into business and running a company. I have also been a volunteer with the fire brigade since I was young. Recently I received a medal for 30 years with the volunteer fire brigade. My father and my son are also members, so it is a 'family hobby'. We receive around 30 to 40 calls per year. It is very important to me. You can learn a lot from it too, for example about leadership in stressful circumstances. And alongside the cheerful products we make here, you also see the important things in life - yes, also the sad ones. Sometimes we think we have problems, but then I see that there are truly important matters to solve. So that creates a very good balance."

*What gives you energy?*

"First of all, my family and friends. I am married and we have two children, a fourteen-year-old son and a twelve-year-old daughter, and a dog. My wife is an intensive care nurse and has her own business as an alternative healer. My son would like to work here eventually. My hobbies also give me energy, as does the team here. When you have a well-running team, it gives a lot of positive energy. I work very hard, but when the sun shines on a Friday afternoon, I can also go into town with my family. That is a good feeling."

*If you could have done something else in your working life, what would it have been?*

"A firefighter, there is no doubt about that. Even when I am abroad, I like to visit the fire brigade. You really help people; you do good work. In business, I try to do something similar, even though it is not a matter of life and death. I can only make and sell something if I fully stand behind it."



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