

BUSINESS TALK

# Dussmann: "Nursing staff worth their weight in gold"

Facility management, homes, a lot of culture and a noblewoman at the top. Few companies are as multifaceted as Dussmann.

By Uwe Marx



**Play of colors:** Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann has had several CEOs, but Wolf-Dieter Adlhoch is said to be "the right one". Dussmann

Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann clarifies her origins and her current state of mind with the most succinct of greetings: "Hi!" she beams at the start of the conversation, with CEO Wolf-Dieter Adlhoch at her side. Two hours later, she will admit, still in good spirits, that she has "already had a few CEOs" in the company, but that it just wasn't right. "And why should you continue something that isn't right?" With Adlhoch, she had "finally found the right person" to lead the Berlin-based Dussmann Group. With her, the former wife of founder Peter Dussmann, who died in 2013, in a central role as the main heiress and Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees of the Peter Dussmann Foundation.

"I became Group CEO overnight, although I didn't intend to," says the American, who was once a student in Denver, an actress in London, as well as a model, and who married Peter Dussmann in 1980 in her late twenties. "But I wanted to fill this new role actively and not passively from the very beginning." This is also the case in the conversation at

the company headquarters in Berlin, below the Dussmann Kulturkaufhaus of city-wide fame with all its books, films, events, and above the modern offices of this facility services provider with around 2.3 billion euros in sales and 65,000 employees. And especially in the decisive bodies: "I bear responsibility for this company," she says. "I can't just sit and listen on the board of trustees." In board meetings, she says, it's no different.

### **Unpleasant questions**

Recently, the fact that Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann is closely involved in operations was briefly pushed into the background. The main topic was an inheritance dispute with her daughter. A court hearing in Berlin, which ruled in favor of the mother, brought this long-running dispute back into focus. It was about an amended will by Peter Dussmann, who was already ill at the time of the amendment, and the question of who was entitled to what. There are a few more facets to this messy family history, but Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann essentially keeps it away from the day-to-day business in the company, so there is nothing further to comment on. She speaks as an entrepreneur. Not as a mother, widow, or party to the proceedings.

There's no need for private matters to get involved in the company, it's complicated enough as it is. Even if CEO Adlhoch contradicts this: "I would call our business complex, not complicated." Facility Management, with which Dussmann has become bigger and bigger and is mostly associated – building services, cleaning, security services, greening and so on – is only one of several business segments. "Food Services" is another, catering for companies, daycare centers, schools, senior citizens, and patients.

### **Musks Gigaburger**

This is where the more than one hundred retirement and nursing homes which Dussmann operates under the name Kursana come into play. And sometimes also very prominent clients. The company is silent about these, but pictures are circulating on the Internet showing Elon Musk biting into a so-called gigaburger at his Tesla factory in Grünheide – fried in a Dussmann food truck.

To take complexity to the extreme, Dussmann is now also active in technical plant construction under the name "Technical Solutions", which includes planning, construction, maintenance, and repair, for example for electrical engineering, elevator technology, and refrigeration and air conditioning technology. "The trend in the market is to offer everything from a single source, because clients want to reduce complexity," says Adlhoch. Here, Dussmann is one of the pioneers. "The challenge is to be a specialist in all trades and also to have integration competence". In the words of Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann: "We are now a Technical Company, you won't find anything like us on the market." There is even a robot dog that patrols fences or buildings in Dussmann red. Acquisitions are part of this path.

At the beginning of the year, Dussmann took over the family-owned company Speidel from Göppingen, which specializes in electrical and communications technology, including all 250 employees; shortly before, the smaller installation company Elektro-Ditter from the Odenwald region had become part of the Dussmann Group. Just two examples. This is likely to continue.

Around 45 percent of sales are generated in Germany, where some Dax companies are among the clients. Among the foreign markets, Italy is a major market and Saudi Arabia a more recent one – which Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann raves about, saying that the country has great buildings. The joint venture Dussmann Ajlan & Brothers in Saudi Arabia was recently awarded contracts in the King Abdullah Financial District. Dussmann is also active in the United Arab Emirates. "Our focus, however, is on

Europe," says Adlhoch. And, despite enormous potential, not in the boss's country of birth. "To gain a foothold in the USA, we would have to make a giant acquisition," says Adlhoch. "That's out of the question for us."

### **Knowing everyone by name**

Part of the multi-faceted nature of this family business, however, is working in a niche. The Kulturkaufhaus, a matter close to Peter Dussmann's heart, is one of them. The same applies to the eight bilingual cultural kindergartens. They do not play a major role in the balance sheet, but they are part of Dussmann's DNA. Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann also radiates down-to-earthness – despite all her internationality and wealth with corresponding real estate holdings.

"I was proud to work for the company from day one," she assures. And for her, it was part of the job to go everywhere, to listen, to ask questions. "My husband was around the company a lot, and I also want to be visible. In the head office, for example, I know every janitor." Her enthusiasm for grassroots employees also appears credible. In the nursing homes and assisted living, for example: "Care workers are worth their weight in gold, but you have to be born for it," she says. Many people, she says, are not cut out for it. It is also a matter of countering staff shortages with technology. Cleaning robots and other robots, for example, are interesting for Dussmann, "because we can hardly find people for certain jobs."

Wolf-Dieter Adlhoch disputes that this is a drama where the changed working world, especially working from home, will cost Dussmann orders: "If office space is reduced, which is what it looks like at the moment, then we will not have less work, but other, more flexible work," he says. Demands would change. After all, that's true in other areas, too. More and more owners, he reports, are paying attention to the lifecycle costs of their buildings. After all, he says, 70 to 80 percent of CO2 emissions are not caused during the construction of buildings, but during their operation over their entire lifetime. It touches on the core business, as Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann puts it: "Basically, we take care of buildings and people from their birth to their death."

### **The company**

The **Dussmann Stiftung & Co. KGaA** is behind the group of companies which grew out of a home care service in Munich, founded by Peter Dussmann in 1963. Today, Dussmann is active in 21 countries, generates 45 percent of its approximately 2.3 billion euros in sales in Germany and employs almost 25,000 of its 65,000 global employees here. The Dussmann Kulturkaufhaus, founded in 1997 at the company headquarters in Berlin, spread over five floors and more than 7,000 square meters, contributes only 30 million euros to total sales, but is something like the heart of the company.

### **The entrepreneur**

**Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann**, born in 1951, is a native American. After attending university (studying literature and psychology), she worked as a model and actress. In her late twenties, she married the entrepreneur Peter Dussmann, with whom she has a daughter. Initially, she did not take up a post in the Dussmann Group. This changed after Peter Dussmann's death in 2013. Today, Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann is Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees of the Peter Dussmann Foundation. In February, she won an inheritance dispute with her daughter before the Berlin Regional Court.