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Business in Berlin

“It all took off after reunification” Catherine Dussmann looks back

Mrs. Dussmann, Peter Dussmann took out ads in the paper for his home cleaning service in Munich in July 1963. Did he tell you how he found his first cleaners?

Of course. He told me everything. But the cleaning staff came later. At the very beginning, he worked with his brother-in-law Charlie, tidying up bachelor apartments, washing cars, and walking dogs. It wasn't until it got to be too much work for him that he ended up hiring a few employees. That didn't go all that smoothly, either.

How so?

They didn't want to clean the toilets. So Peter and Charlie cleaned the toilets themselves, and the ladies did the rest of the apartment. At some point, they said to each other, we can't keep going this way, so they started hiring only people who were actually willing to clean the entire bathroom.

The hourly wage back then was 3.17 marks. It started out with the bachelors in 1963. They were charged 11.50 marks a month for two cleanings. And then, just a few years later, the customer base had already grown to include ministries, the university in Munich, and hospitals.

Peter also had high-profile clients, like the widow of a high-ranking Nazi officer, who lived in a villa in Grünwald. She didn't want to pay. But Peter demanded his money and didn't let her brush him off. He

even ended up having to sue – and, ultimately, he got his money. He learned one big lesson from that: If you do the job, you should get paid for it. And Peter was very good at getting things done.



Peter Dussmann (left) tests cleaning machines for hospitals with colleagues in the 1970s.

He also had a lot of ideas. He was the one who established outsourcing.

That’s still the heart of our business today. We think about what clients need and what we can do for them. It started with cleaning, and then we moved into catering and beyond to technical facility management. Our latest service is cybersecurity. We’ve launched a joint venture with a partner based in Israel and are building a team here in Germany right now.

Who are you aiming to serve there?

We already provide physical security services to a lot of our clients by providing surveillance for their properties, including critical infrastructure. And many of them also work with data. Take hospitals, for example. We want to help them protect their data. And most of all, we want to support them in the event of an actual cyberattack.

The Dussmann Group now operates in 21 countries, although you had to learn some lessons the hard way. Engagements in Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Russia, China, and the U.S. fell through.

Luckily, we sold Hong Kong and China at the start of the pandemic, in early 2020. I shut down our business in Russia after Putin annexed Crimea. In Brazil, the inflation was unbearable. Peter was the one who ended up shutting down the business in the United States, for various reasons. But one thing that was always nice about the U.S. was that it was where we met.

That was in Los Angeles in 1980. Later, Peter Dussmann would refer to his “most important acquisition.” How did you meet?

It was St. Patrick’s Day. I went out to an Irish pub to celebrate with a fellow actress who had Irish roots. Peter was there to celebrate a big business deal. He had bought a security company. Peter’s cousin’s wife was the one who introduced us. Peter could barely speak English, but I spoke a little German because I was playing a terrorist in a movie about the Baader-Meinhof Gang at the time. He called me the next day and asked me out to dinner. We were married in 1982.

In the United States?

No, in Bavaria. The company was headquartered in Munich, and Bavaria was our home until the Wall came down. Then, starting on November 10, 1989, Peter was the first West German entrepreneur in

what had been East Germany. He built new company headquarters on Friedrichstraße.

Were you there when he visited the Virgin Megastore in New York and took away some inspiration for the Kulturkaufhaus store on Friedrichstraße?

Yes. We were sitting over breakfast one day when he got the idea for the store. And then we took a look around the Virgin Megastore, Fnac in Monte Carlo, and another big store in LA. We came away with what we had learned and decided where we wanted our store to be different – we wanted it to be one of a kind, specifically.



Peter Dussmann, then 24, started his own business called “**Münchener Heimpflegedienst**” to provide home cleaning services to bachelors in the summer of 1963. The service group now has **68,000 employees** in facility management and 110 senior care facilities. Dussmann suffered a severe **stroke** in 2008, shortly before his 70th birthday. He died in 2013

The store is definitely unique in its business hours.

Peter had incredible ideas. He didn’t hire trained salespeople. Instead, he hired people from the culture scene. And he fought for attractive business hours and managed to have the store open 24 hours a day. We ended up cutting back there, because who goes shopping at 2 in the morning? The store is now open from 9 a.m. to midnight, and we’re really happy with the business.

You borrowed a sphinx from the Neues Museum, so the store was officially declared a museum shop, with longer hours.

It wasn’t just the sphinx, actually. There were also two figures of the Egyptian god Horus, which were placed to the side of the stairs leading to the café. Peter had his stroke the day the figures were installed. I had them taken right back out. They were bad luck. The sphinx is almost 3500 years old. She’s one powerful lady.

Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Peter Dussmann invited 600 hospital managers from East Germany to Hamburg to tell them more about his services. He was really able to harness the changes taking place in eastern Germany and all across East Europe like no one else. The company expanded enormously.

It took a lot of effort in some cases. He complained about all the harbor tours he had to go on with the hospital people in Hamburg. But after reunification is when things really took off for Dussmann. We accompanied clients from the West on trips to Eastern Europe and supported them there as a provider of integrated facility management services.

We also won over a lot of new clients.

Peter Dussmann wasn’t much known for his patience. What annoyed him the most? Stupidity. He also got annoyed when his trust was abused. Trust is crucial. Our clients trust us with their properties and food service, with their kids at our childcare centers and their other family members at our Kursana

senior facilities. We have to earn that trust through dependability and good service. And the only way to do that is with committed, dedicated employees.

And a hardworking boss.

Peter was always working. He didn't sleep much, either. He'd get back up and go back to work after sleeping for two or three hours.

The group of companies moved from Munich to Berlin in the mid-1990s. Peter Dussmann once said later on that he met as many people in Berlin in three years as in Munich in 30. How did he do that?

Munich was very traditional at the time. It was a bit snobbish in places, with a closed society. But my husband was from Swabia, a whole other region. Berlin in the 1990s was a whole different environment. Everything was in flux here, moving and changing, and he liked that. He was really able to make his mark in business, and that's what he did.

He also supported culture on the side, especially the State Opera.

Peter loved classical music and opera. I'm not a big fan of opera. Classical is okay, but I'm an American, so I prefer jazz and musicals. Classical music also always reminds me of him, and that makes me sad.

You've been the Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees for 12 years now. You've gotten to know a number of CEOs in that time...

... And they've gotten to know me. I started to take on more and more responsibility after Peter's stroke, back in 2008.

How has the company changed since then?

We work on solutions for our clients, and we have a good spirit at the company. Our 68,000 people enjoy working at Dussmann, and everyone works as a team. I'm proud of that. We work on innovations and are constantly thinking about what we can do for our clients. Our clients need to do well, since then we do well, too.

How do you feel when you see a vehicle with the Dussmann logo in Romania or Vietnam?

It comes as a shock – it really brings home to me just how big the Dussmann Group is.

The company is planting a tree for every hour of employee volunteer work to mark its 60th birthday. How many trees are there?

I don't know. A lot, I hope. But it's not only about planting trees. We want to get people involved in climate action. We want to give something back. "We care for more" is our motto.



Catherine Dussmann polishes a Mustang. The boss worked incognito at the company for several weeks some ten years back.

You came up with the Kulturkindergarten childcare center idea over ten years ago, and you had to overcome Peter’s resistance to make it a reality. What were his objections?

He was using a wheelchair by then. I remember telling him about the idea, and he just said, “No, no, no,” because he didn’t see any business opportunity there. I did it anyway. And not just to earn money, but also to help working women find a place for their kids – every day, any time of day. But it’s really hard to find childcare staff.

The project is really important to you. There are a dozen centers now, and the kids who go there are also receiving bilingual care. There are a lot of things that are important to me. That includes the Kulturkaufhaus. The English Bookshop was my idea. Right now, we’re planning the Christmas decorations – that’s so much fun, and I’m contributing a few ideas there. We’re planning to use “Christmas is more” as our slogan during the Christmas season – more than just gifts, it’s about having enough of all the things that make life worth living.

Do you celebrate Christmas in Berlin?

I’m usually out in the country in Bavaria, with my dogs, cats, and chickens.

Have you become a Bavarian?

No, but I do understand the dialect by now. I’m a Californian. But I like spending Christmas in the snow in Bavaria. I spend a couple weeks at home in the start of the year.

How is the group doing now, in the summer of 2023, 60 years after it was founded?

2023 is going to be a good year. We’re always growing and developing and continuing our wonderful journey. And all the while, we never forget our DNA and the values that our founder instilled in us. Finding workers is our biggest challenge.

So how do you do it?

We give people opportunities to grow and advance. People need to be able to develop in their work, since that’s what makes work enjoyable. These days, we have employees from over 100 countries. Many people who have barely any language skills or training can get their start with us and learn and grow on the job. We train them on how to use digital tools, for example.

Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann

The daughter of a successful lawyer from **St. Louis**, Missouri, Catherine von Fürstenberg-Dussmann was working as an **actress** and designer when she met Peter Dussmann in Los Angeles in 1980. They were married in 1982 and had a daughter. When the company founder started having health problems, Catherine Dussmann took on a growing role in supervisory bodies. She has chaired the **Board of Trustees** for years, appointing figures such as former CDU politician **Roland Koch**. Mrs. Dussmann won a years-long inheritance dispute with the couple’s daughter before the Regional Court of Berlin