

»THERE IS A LOT MORE TO SUSTAINABILITY THAN ONE MIGHT EXPECT. THIS IS BEING REFLECTED IN EVERYTHING: IN THE MATERIALS USED, IN THE PRODUCTION ORGANIZATION AND IN THE APPRECIATION OF THE EMPLOYEES.« **SANDRO PIROUTZ, EMBA 2024-25, GMP 2022-23, YMP 2021, COO, WOODY, AUSTRIA**

**March 2024**

*Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova, photos provided by Sandro Piroutz*

**F**irst of all, congratulations on completing the first module of the Executive MBA program. How intense was it in comparison to what you had in GMP and YMP programs that you are an alumnus of? How tough was accounting for you and how did you like the marketing course?

Thank you! Yes, to be honest the first module was quite intense for me, especially the

first week. In the YMP and GMP I think you get a very good general overview of the topics, but compared to the EMBA, the individual courses are much shorter. In the EMBA, you go deeper and in much more detail into several different topics at once when you discuss the cases in the class. I really liked the accounting course even though it was a heavy workload, I learned a lot from Prof. Jim Ellert and I really enjoyed working with him. Same goes for marketing.

I think Dr. Joe Pons is a great professor, who gives valuable advice to the class and has a great understanding of how marketing really works. I feel very comfortable in the classroom, we are a great team where everyone supports each other and, even though I am the youngest, I don't think I am behind in any way.

**You are on the way to become our "triple" alumnus, completing Young Managers Program,**

**General Management Program and now doing the Executive MBA. Why did you decide to upgrade your educational path with an EMBA program at IEDC now? Have you considered any other business schools along the way?**

I chose the EMBA program because I wanted to gain more knowledge in several of the management topics that would help me deal with issues I'm confronted with every day. I believe that the EMBA is not only about learning but also about changing and growing as a person. It helps you see things in a different way and changes your perspective on problems, strategic decisions and how to lead people. That, I think, is a valuable journey. Since I had completed other programs at IEDC before, I had no doubt that I will go for an EMBA in Bled.

**Tell us about your family business. How long does the tradition last? Why are your shoes such a great product and who are your main customers?**

Our company has a long tradition. It was founded in 1922 by my great grandfather and I am the fourth generation now. Back in the day, we had

only produced clogs with a stiff sole and a quite hard upper leather part for farmers and workers. Today, our products range from clogs, sandals, boots to the world's first sneakers with a flexible wooden sole. Currently, we are focusing much more on the design of the shoes and their colours, keeping an eye on fashion trends. Producing two collections every year, we have over 120 different models now. Every shoe has a flexible wooden sole with an ergonomic footbed which is very comfortable to wear throughout the whole day. Using natural materials such as wood and leather, we create a stylish, comfortable, and sustainable shoe that we now sell worldwide. Right now, I am working on the entry on two new market which are the United Arab Emirates and London. Leveraging our long experience in the business and being confident in our innovative product, I think we are all ready and excited to take the next big step.

**How many people you have now in the company and how are they split (production, marketing, purchasing/suppliers, etc)? How do you monitor performance of your business? What are the constraints that you have to overcome in order to develop further?**

We have 35 employees at our headquarters in Austria and we have a partner company in Bosnia with 20 people working for us and producing all of the upper parts of the shoe, so-called "shafts" for

our shoes. Out of these 35 people, 25 are working in the production, our shop at the factory and the warehouse, from where we ship our orders every day. The other ten people are working in the office in several departments, such as marketing and sales, purchasing, production planning, and accounting and controlling. Especially in the production and marketing and sales we have several KPIs to measure the performance of the team. For me, the most important part is to create an environment where everybody



feels comfortable, can express themselves and feel motivated to give their best. If we manage to do that, we are able to achieve great success in the future!

**Do you have other siblings or larger family members that are also involved in management of the company? If yes, how do you split responsibilities? Do you have any "family employment policy" that you follow?**

I have two older brothers who both made a very successful



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way out of the company. My father never forced anyone to take over the business. He just said that if anyone decides to do it, he would be happy and supportive all the way. However, he is supportive of us, no matter whether we are involved or not in the business. The other family member in the company is my mother and with the three of us we are making a great team.

**Have you ever considered a potential career path outside the family business? If yes, which one? If not, how do you feel about your role in the business so far?**

Of course, I considered it at some point. I was always very much interested in the automotive industry, and I could see myself building my career there by working for a larger automotive brand. At the same time, the fashion industry was always appealing to me, and our company is in fashion business. So, making my mind about joining in and taking over the company at the right point, made me at ease with myself, and now I am completely happy with my role, my life and how things have been going so far.

**Which direction do you see your family business developing in upcoming several years? What innovative strategies do you plan to implement to modernize the clog production process while maintaining the traditional craftsmanship that sets your family business apart?**

I see a huge potential for our brand and our product in the



upcoming years. The fact that we are a niche player, helps us differentiate from all the bigger brands of the shoe industry. Our shoes are unique because of the wooden sole, their specific design and style, and the sustainability. With these special characteristics I believe that we can also keep up with the younger generation's aspirations that value the elimination of the fast fashion and the importance of sustainability and quality today. We are far beyond the typical clog production company today, as our product range is wide, and our sneakers model helps attract more and more customers. I always say that we should never forget where our roots are, but that we should carry all this experience to the new world of wooden shoes.

**How do you envision technology role in the production process and customer engagement for the business? Where do you see it bringing the most benefit for your business?**

We don't have any CNC machines in our production and for the next year I am not planning to buy one. There are in total 568 operations needed in order to produce a pair of woody shoes. Wood is not that easy to manufacture as steel or

aluminium and steel needs a lot of handwork. Since our sole production is quite complex it would not be an easy task to transfer the production to a fully automated one. But of course, we are renewing some of our machines and thinking about how we can adjust and improve our production process with new technologies. The biggest benefits that technology could bring us is the quality improvement of the finished product, the productivity that the machines bring and therefore also increased productivity and safety for our employees.

**Sustainability is a significant concern for consumers today. How do you approach this topic and which parts of your business does it affect the most? How do you communicate this to your customers?**

Protecting the natural foundations of life is one of the most important tasks of our time. At woody, we are committed to environmentally friendly operations and careful use of resources. There is a lot more to sustainability than one might expect. This is being reflected in everything: in the materials used, in the production organization and in the appreciation of the

employees. Willow wood from sustainable forestry combined with an Italian leather are the main components of our flexible wooden shoes that are remarkably durable and that makes them very sustainable. Moreover, we use the leftovers and waste from our wood production to heat the entire company area, we avoid using unnecessary plastic in packaging, and our office and operations are fully digitized making any paper administration redundant. We have also taken another step towards using renewable energy in the form of a 105kWp photovoltaic system. Furthermore, in 2022 we launched a community project called "woody au forestry" where we planted 1,500 trees on a total of 1.4 hectares of land. In 2023 we won the Carinthian sustainability award for companies. We are, of course, happy to share our entire commitment openly with our customers on social media and the website.

**Are there other challenges you anticipate facing in your line of business and how do you plan to overcome them?**

We are living in quite challenging economic times: the world and the environment is changing very fast and there are plenty of challenges we face every day. Besides common difficulties in supply chains, pricing, and unnecessary bureaucracy, the biggest challenge, in my opinion, is to create a real need for the customer. Nowadays, we live in the "overproduction" world, you can buy almost

anything you want, regardless whether you need it or not. A lot of people are aware of it and are more cautious in their purchasing behavior. Our task is to convince people that our shoes are not just another fashion item in their closet but something that is good for them and at the same time they will like and enjoy, and will be happy with the purchase. That's why I think making customers aware that this is a sustainable and great choice, is the biggest challenge.

**Is there a lot of competition in your sector and how do you differentiate from others?**

There are some competitors out there but what makes us stand out is the quality and the product variety. We are using only high quality materials and putting a lot of effort into the manufacturing. Of course, we are a more expensive, but people do notice the difference. And, of course, we can offer many different types of shoes for men and women such as clogs, boots, sandals and, especially, sneakers that none of the competitors has yet. The sneakers are very unique are our bestseller.

**Can you share a significant memory or lesson learned from working in the family business so far?**

There are two, actually. The first lesson serves me as a credo to live by - "Conceive. Believe. Achieve." Once you have an idea and know what it would take to get it done and put all your efforts in it, you can achieve any of your goals.

The second lesson is about keeping calm when things are going well. Don't think you are on the top of the world, but keep calm and keep moving forward. This doesn't mean that you should not stop to contemplate where you are. It just means that you should be wary, because things can change fast. Take what's good in the business and move forward and try to hold on to it and be thankful for what you got.

**Family business requires a lot of attention and dedication, what are your ways of unwinding after an intensive day at work?**

I really like doing sports and cannot imagine living without it. After a long day, I enjoy going for a long run or for a ride on my street bike where I can let myself go, clear my mind and recharge in the nature. Or I go for a hard interval training where I can push my physical limits. I also really really appreciate a good company, or spending time with my girlfriend, meeting my friends, having a beer and enjoying a good conversation.



# WHAT ONE CAN'T FIND ON SANDRO'S RESUME



EMBA 2024-25, GMP 2023, YMP 2021

**Sandro Piroutz**  
COO, woody,  
Austria

*The number of triathlons and/or marathons you completed so far...*

*Good question, probably around 30 in total. My first marathon, however, I will do in April in Vienna.*

*How many countries did you travel to and what is your favourite destination?*

*If business trips count, I had the privilege to visit 20 different countries till now, but a lot of them I visited for vacations as well. My favorite destination so far is, probably, Indonesia. I really liked the culture, the life, and the beautiful beaches there.*

*Do you have a bucket list and what's on it?*

*I have not written it down yet, but the two things that are my mind for the next few years is to compete at a full Ironman and to travel to Australia.*

*What is your favourite music/band/artist at the moment?*

*I really listen to every kind of music, from Austrian folk music to Justin Bieber and to rock music when I am training. But I am really looking forward to listening to the new album of Post Malone.*

*The latest TV series you watched, and you liked them because...*

*The latest series I have watched was Peaky Blinders on Netflix. It evokes a lot of different emotions, and the storyline develops in such a way that you can hardly wait to see the next episode.*

*If you were a superhero, what would be your superhero power and what would you use it for?*

*I would probably choose the ability to fly. I really like traveling but sometimes it can be hard to be on a plane for more than 8 hours.*