

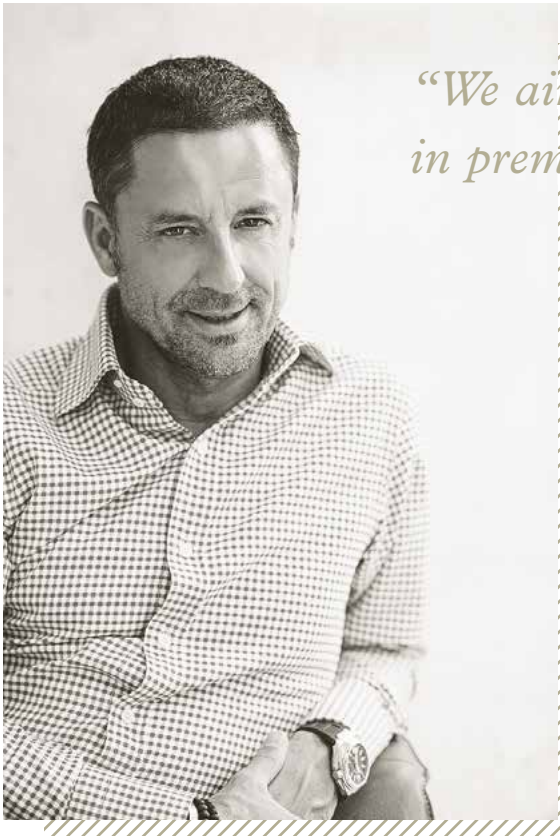
THE Crocodile



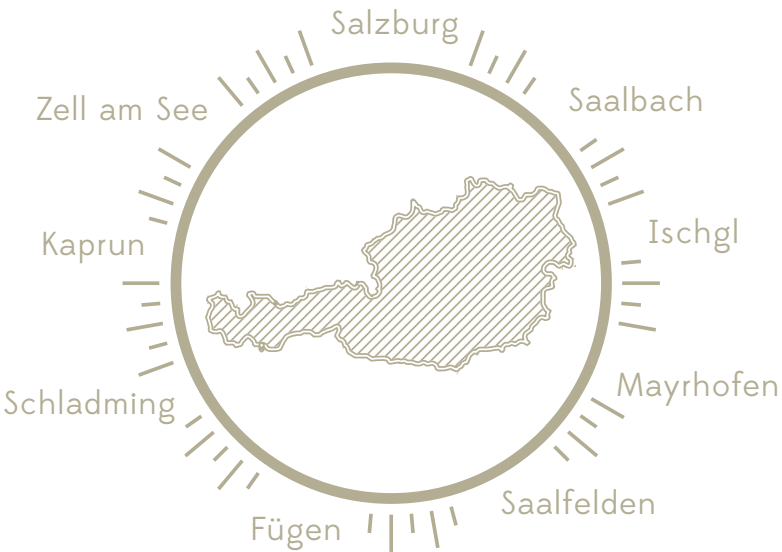
in the Mountains

In order to understand how offline works in the digital era, it is worth taking a look at the sports retailer Bründl from Austria. A lesson in honest customer relations. And a genuine shopping experience.

Image source: Johannes Vogt for blocher partners



“We aim to be the very best in premium sports retailing.”



Outside, the sun is shining over the Kitzsteinhorn mountain, once again allowing it to reveal its full splendor in these late summer-like fall days; inside, in the main Intersport Bründl store in Kaprun, the boss is already giving some thought to the coming winter season: A new shop just opened in Saalfelden. It is the sports retailer’s 24th, and in the next few months needs to demonstrate that once again the Bründl “adventure shopping” formula works – and that taking a business risk is worthwhile.

Anyone acquainted with Christoph Bründl knows that he already has new plans up his sleeve – even if he only answers questions in that direction with a smile. But one thing he does rule out: There is not going to be a Bründl store on the Internet. “I have no intention of being a small fish in the European online shark pool, as the sharks are becoming ever bigger and more brutal; we wouldn’t stand a chance.”

I beg your pardon? A small fish, the man who is managing partner of over two dozen outlets in nine towns and cities in three Austrian states, with some 450 employees and 19,000 square meters of retail space? “I prefer to be the crocodile in the mountains”, he says. To be more exact: “The only crocodile in the mountains.” The sharks, i.e. Amazon, Zalando and their consorts, are welcome to fight among themselves for the top places on Google; Bründl is striving to lead the way in the Austrian winter sport resorts. “We aim to be the very best in premium sports retailing,” the crocodile says. And, as far as possible, without the online community. OK, there is a website, and a few social media channels, but no online shop. Because to be one of the big players you have to be the leader in terms of price, logistics and presence. “We head for Bründl as if flocking to a temple that will fulfil our desires”, is how the boss puts it.

Image source: Bernd Kammerer

Quality means the customer coming back, not the product. Bründl offers an exchange guarantee. If you don't get on with your brand new skis, bike, ski boots, or walking shoes, you can just return them, end of story. For those who have still to make up their mind there is "Test & Buy", a scheme whereby you can put a product to the test and only pay when you are convinced it is right for you. With measures such as these the sports retailer has become a leader after all, an analogue leader. And after a good 60 years, the question of whether the crocodile in the mountains ever faced predators is no longer asked. "We only ever attack ourselves", Bründl says. "We are always the ones who question ourselves, reinvent ourselves, and raise the bar." His credo: "Get away from the boring, dead middle of the market, which is defined only by price and copying ideas." Christoph Bründl and his brother Bernhard, the head of the legendary Bründl Academy, are the second generation of the family to run the business. Their father Hans established it in 1956 as an Alpine garage start-up. The wainwright initially made skis, as did other Austrian skiing pioneers. There were many in Kaprun, a village with a mere 3,000 inhabitants, who shook their heads whenever Bründl altered or expanded his headquarters, eight times in total. Until the last building, hardly a few years old, made way for a spectacular monolith, an Alpine provocation with the rank of a place of pilgrimage. Nowadays they all know better, apart, it would seem, from Bründl. In the boss's office there is a quotation by Steve Jobs, who made another start-up by the name of Apple into something big. "Everyone said: 'It can't be done.' Then along came someone who didn't know, and did it." In principle that describes Bründl's approach very well. When others erect walls if there is a storm brewing, Bründl builds windmills. If business moves online, Bründl opens up new stores in idyllic mountain settings, as he did recently in Saalfelden and the Zillertal valley. While service and advice are being taken away from customers and sold as a self-service project in an emancipatory declaration, Bründl declares his employees to be the biggest asset – and regularly invests a small fortune in them.

It is actually only superficially about selling and hiring out. Emotional ties are more important than skis and ski bindings. Turning visitors into customers, and customers into active fans. This way the jack of all trades has become one of the big names among sports shops. He has been shaking the sector up for years now, working with small data rather than blindly trusting algorithms. Likes making supposedly unpopular decisions at short notice, but never shortsightedly. Talks about extraordinary ways of selling, development facilities and quality of life even before the closing time, whilst others are making headlines with temporary workers and disgraceful working hours. The signal from the mountains: The more digital things are, the more human they are. Bründl is convinced that "in the future too, most people will prefer buying things from people and not from machines." He regards all the fuss as hype, and of colleagues he says: "Lots of them see the Web as something to complain about. Earlier it was competition, then customers, politics, the weather. They're fleeing, as it were."

Bründl is not fleeing anywhere, neither from himself with excuses, nor to the big city. Unless, that is, to learn from other big players in the sector such as the KaDeWe department store and the five-star Ritz-Carlton hotel in Berlin. The mountains are his world. This is where he grew up; they made him what he is. Though the store in Salzburg has the biggest sales area, even the designer outlet follows the typical Bründl logic.



Image source: Bernd Kammerer

Image source: Christian Wöckinger for blocher partners



Realised by Umdasch Shopfitting: The Bründl store in Salzburg – an Eldorado for sports enthusiasts across 1,800 square meters and three stories.

“If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together and assign them tasks, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

No price war, no masses of goods, instead a gastronomic touchpoint and a walk-in magic moment in the form of a Polar station. With a video screen, ice throne, temperatures of around minus 25 degrees and real snow, which Arab guests like to put in their pockets and take with them. An average 800 visitors a day come to the multimedia cold room. It is a powerful marketing tool, as the icy attraction is a popular selfie motif, gets posted, liked, and shared. And at the end of the day, for all the playing on emotions, it is also about pointing out to customers, by means of a thermal imaging camera, the advantages of the more expensive, but warmer jacket.

Bründl gives people a space in which they are able to communicate in many ways and relate to other people and products. A genuine customer experience journey, which is worthy of its name, because it is not all about show, but about a chance to talk. And in the midst of it all the much-vaunted sales staff, who with their ability to deal with and inspire customers, help them solve their problems and increase their freedom. To this end the complex rental business has been moved online. Nor, for logistic reasons, can an iPad be missing at work. The brand

ambassadors are meant to listen and cater fully to their opposite number. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry put it very well: "If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together and assign them tasks, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea". Successful sales staff know how to transfer the principle to the mountains, Christoph Bründl emphasises, without wanting to represent success, as success is mostly the cause of failure. The secret is probably in the fact that not even in these digitally hysterical times is the crocodile prone to taking gasping breaths.