

## Business Background

# As Good As New!

### Turning used furniture into design classics

Text: Stefan Pinkner



Health friendly furniture in appealing designs

Behind the "ecomobel" is a network which was formed in April 2002 in the context of a research project for sustainable managing. The idea was the brainchild of Dr. Werner Baumann from the Institute for Environmental Research at the University of Dortmund.

From 2002 to 2005 the Federal Ministry promoted an initiative under the official project title "Re-use of furniture as an example of regional recycling management". A goal

from the outset was to generate as much practical work as possible, and to ensure that used furniture would be recycled and sold ecologically. Ecologically meaning on one hand durable and long lasting and on the other the use of environmentally friendly materials and a test on formaldehyde content. To this end "Fluxomat" equipment was developed and patented, with this equipment you can determine within 2-3 minutes whether a piece of furniture contains formaldehyde or not. Furniture with low levels of formal-

dehyde is one of ecomobel's seals of quality. The first piece of furniture sold with the Ecomobel seal of quality was at the 2003 EDG Furniture Fair in Dortmund.

Network ideals were at the centre right from the start. Amongst the many interested parties involved were the Chair of Marketing, Institute for Environmental Research and the faculty for space planning at the University of Dortmund, the Fraunhofer Institute for logistics and material flow and the Thüringer Institute for process engineering. It was clear from the beginning that success could only be guaranteed if buyers were found for the recycled furniture. The best way into the living rooms of potential buyers was through good products, which in this case meant: health friendly furniture in pleasing contemporary designs. The network ideals were conveyed: craftsmen, artists, contractors and dealers worked together to create innovative designs for old furniture which would be attractive to potential customers.

In July 2005 ecomobel GmbH was created in Dortmund. There are now three second hand furniture companies in Dortmund, Hagen and Hattingen, selling ecomobel locally and on the website [www.ecomobel.de](http://www.ecomobel.de). The organisation functions along the lines of a franchise. Partners add ecomobel to their stock with a kind of shop within a shop. They receive their own range of furniture on their website and they can change and adjust the photos and furniture descrip-



Lively MD Laura Faltz



In love with old furniture

tions. Today there are partners in seven cities within ecomobel network. The latest addition is in Cologne in the Flohmarkt Halle in Mauritiussteinweg, where you can wander around 300 square metres devoted to furniture of all styles and designs.

Against a commission on all sales ecomobel gives a Fluxomat (formaldehyde tested) certificate and the ecomobel seal of quality, it also operates the web page and offers support with various marketing activities. There's also the lively Managing Director Laura Faltz who has big plans for the coming years, "By the end of 2006 we want to be represented in at least twelve cities. The number of partners is unlimited and the more partners we have the more exciting the online shop becomes for the customer." The access statistics show the level of interest in the shop: at the end of 2005 the average number of page impressions was 80,000.

"We have a border free philosophy", says Laura Faltz, "we can easily add partners from other countries to the network. The appeal of second hand products is much higher in countries such as Belgium, Austria and England, than it is in Germany". They are also seeking to change German thinking in terms of second hand furniture "We need to clean up the rather dusty image that Germany has regarding second hand goods. We want to make second hand furniture socially desirable. We're doing this through original and contemporary design and also through events which are fun for visitors."

New customers are more than likely to come through the internet. After the first contact

is made Laura visits the stores personally and presents the ecomobel idea. In addition, the research project has also organised and taken part in two trade conferences on the future of second hand. Through these events the first partners outside of Dortmund could soon be won.

There are also two second hand federations in Germany which bring together over 250 companies. "Ideal partners are interested companies, willing to try something new, have a creative vein and are in love with old things," just like Laura Faltz.

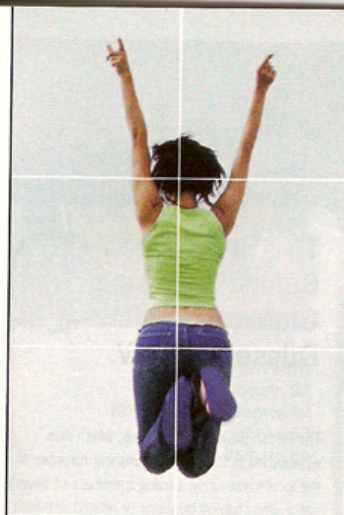


#### INFORMATION

Flohmarkthalle Köln  
Mauritiussteinweg 100  
50676 Köln

Opening times  
Mon-Fri 12 - 7pm  
Sat 12 - 5pm

ecomobel office  
Laura Faltz  
T 0231-516 90 49  
F 0231-516 90 30  
www.ecomobel.de



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