



**WHY DIETRICH BRENNENSTUHL, A SPECIALIST
IN LED LAMPS, IS PULLING IN THE REINS ON GROWTH**

LAIID-BACK LAMP MAKER

Dietrich Brennenstuhl has a problem others might envy. His company is growing of its own accord. And that's something he will soon want to rein in. Why? "In order to remain flexible," says this qualified civil engineer and architect whose purist LED lamps illuminate the desks of elite designers and decision makers as well as entire buildings of international corporations. In groundbreaking, energy-saving ways, of course.

HEINER VON DER LADEN

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It started off small. After spending the first few years of his career at his own architect's office, Dietrich Brennenstuhl stopped doing high-rise construction in 1988 and founded a lighting company called Nimbus in the southern German city of Stuttgart. A newcomer, he quickly specialized in individual solutions using LED systems. His formula consisted of cool streamlined designs, high-grade materials, and sophisticated technology. The idea was to produce lighting whose sheer functionality would fulfill its purpose in uncompromising form—while looking attractive in the process. In designing and building prototypes, it helped that Brennenstuhl is “not just” an architect but had also completed training as a toolmaker before embarking on his studies.

The laid-back lamp maker in worn jeans must have known that his products would quickly attract a keen eye for trendsetting products among architects, and his unobtrusive Nimbus lights were soon gracing villas, galleries, lounges, and executive offices. As an architect himself, Brennenstuhl had a good idea of what would elicit the enthusiasm of his colleagues. He was sure about one thing—architects steer clear of mass-produced goods and they need to be given the space for individual solutions. “Precisely that,” he says, “is what we as a small company could offer.” If desired, Nimbus produces unique items for specific construction projects or for special purposes—exactly in accordance →

LED systems from Stuttgart are also in demand in Hamburg: the ultramodern Unilever headquarters in the Hafencity (left) were given rings of light with a diameter of ten meters for the enormous atrium, plus standing lamps for every office. And since being reconstructed, the classical floor-trading hall of Hamburg's Chamber of Commerce has been lit with 160,000 LEDs in 380 light module panels from Nimbus.



Dietrich Brennenstuhl (standing) confers with his designers in a pure white conference room. They specialize in producing unique solutions for architects and contractors.



THE DESIGNER, THE DUCATI, AND TWO LARGE DOGS

with the design and technical specifications of the planners.

Specialty lights account for ten to fifteen percent of the company's annual sales (30 million euros). Just like mass-produced items, they must not be too expensive if they are to hold their own against the competition. "If a construction project's costs get out of hand, it's the furnishings that often suffer because they are installed at the very end. And that includes lighting," explains Brennenstuhl.

In addition to cost pressure, there is another crucial factor in business operations: namely, time pressure. Not infrequently, late order decisions have to be compensated for by short delivery times. The time factor has an even greater impact on small companies if their products suddenly catch the attention of large-scale customers. This is what happened to Nimbus in 2008: Unilever, the world's largest consumer goods corporation, wanted to furnish its imposing new German headquarters in Hamburg's Hafencity with standing lamps from Stuttgart. A fine thing for Nimbus. But the production team of around 50 employees could initially manufacture just about two prototypes of the desired standing lamps per day. The order had a volume, however, of 3,500 of them. "That might have been more than we could cope with," remarks Brennenstuhl.

Fortunately the creative entrepreneur realized that he could hardly manage this project without outside help. "We had to learn how to organize ourselves back then," says Brennenstuhl, who is now 55 years old. At short notice he brought in Porsche Consulting from the neighboring town of Bietigheim-Bissingen for first aid. In no time at all, a special takt-controlled production area with tightly structured processes for standing lamps was set up along with precisely coordinated assembly teams and efficient component logistics. Very quickly, production was revved up to the target capacity of 100 lamps a day. This enabled the company to light up the Unilever building in Hamburg within the specified period of one and a half months. "That completely changed our company," recalls Brennenstuhl. What helped him during this period was a close exchange of ideas with his employees, with whom he likes to gather in large number over breakfast—a daily appointment that his constant companions, the hunting dog Balu and the sheepdog Nena, enjoy attending as well. And when the small, reasonably priced Italian restaurant across the street was about to close, Brennenstuhl promptly

bought the rustic-style place himself—to ensure that his staff could continue to have lunch at their favorite locale.

All of the other divisions at Nimbus, including development, design, sales, and logistics, are now based on the same operational excellence that was launched in production. The company's rapid rate of growth would not have been possible otherwise. The workforce now consists of 170 women and men, and around 80 more might be added over the next three to five years. Although one should note that the urgently needed electrical engineers—preferably with

architectural degrees as well—are just as hard to find on the German labor market as good sales personnel.

Despite its expansion, Nimbus has thus far not had to move to a new location. "Thanks to good organization we have quadrupled in size on the same surface area," says the boss with satisfaction. His company headquarters, which once housed asylum seekers, has an inconspicuous exterior and faces an enormous car-washing facility. Inside, old markings on a wall left in its original condition testify to the building's previous use. But otherwise its white loft atmosphere reflects a creative spirit. The motorcycle that the boss drives, a fiery red Ducati 996 with 180 horsepower, stands parked in a box amid the lamps on display. Brennenstuhl—whose name literally means "burning seat"—enjoys spending free weekends burning through a few laps on Spain's Circuit de Catalunya race track in Barcelona. Sometimes he is accompanied by a good acquaintance—former Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher.

In contrast to the prominent racing driver, the architect from Stuttgart likes to step on the brakes when it comes to the continuation of his success story. "We've got to be careful not to grow too quickly," he says, "or we'll enter dimensions that are too big. And that would cost us our flexibility." In the future, therefore, "we may have to turn down a few order proposals—even if reluctantly." Brennenstuhl, who is a member of the respected German Design Council, definitely wants to retain the exclusivity of his products and continue to delight customers with individualized solutions.

The controlled braking maneuver he envisions will not be easy, for interest on the part of potential customers is growing. The home market of Germany still accounts for 55 percent of total business,



Nimbus boss Brennenstuhl with an oil drum: He would like to see his brightly painted “Roxxane” table lamp in the Museum of Modern Art.

but international markets are making up ground: 35 percent of sales presently come from other European countries, and the rest from overseas. The first large-scale project in the USA is underway, which will provide new light to the University of Baltimore. Activities in North America could bring Brennenstuhl a step closer to fulfilling a dream. He would like one of his lamps to find a place at New York’s Museum of Modern Art one day. A good candidate would be the extremely slim “Line Z” table lamp, based on the shape of the streamlined letter. As would a real eye-catcher, the “Roxxane,” which features seven striking coats of fluorescent red paint on high-grade metal. The Nimbus people originally chose this unusual color to make a splash at their stand at trade fairs. But they had underestimated the public eye and were subsequently taken by surprise when orders started flooding in—everyone wanted the arresting paint job. Shortly thereafter specialty stores for designer lamps were clearing entire shop windows to give Nimbus and its fiery “Roxxane” a suitable stage.

If it ends up taking a while for the “Roxxane” to enter the Museum of Modern Art, Brennenstuhl is ready with plan B. “I’d like to provide the lighting for a museum,” he says. “It’s got to be extremely reserved, for the lights should not compete in any way with the art.” If his Nimbus products manage to “sneak into” a museum this way, the Stuttgart lamp maker would also be pleased. After all, he is a soft-spoken man—even if he occasionally gives full throttle to his Ducati. ←