



As featured in
The CEO Magazine
For more info visit
theceomagazine.com



The Ties That Bind

As a family business, Unibind understands the changing nature of the binding industry. The company has grown and flourished through years of research, development, and worldwide client feedback.

Images by Michaël Smits

Equipped with a Masters in Law, Esmeralda Peleman, CEO of Unibind, originally wanted to be a lawyer when she finished school. It was her father who convinced her to try working for the family business before stepping out on her own, and Esmeralda hasn't looked back since. "I started first in sales in 1998–1999. In January 1999, we took over the distribution in the Netherlands, so I was involved in the takeover and I was going to Holland twice a week because I was responsible for that region, making sure the continuation would be successful and learning more about the back office. I was always helping in the company, even as a child. The factory was next to our house, so every time I was out of school, I spent a lot of time over there.

"When I started here officially, I was in charge of local sales in Benelux. We had quite ambitious growth plans around 2001, so we

really had to expand and recruit some people, because we were here in Belgium with fewer than 50 people. One of the important things that we had to set up was HR and recruitment, so I became responsible for HR and implemented the HR plan. I made things more professional—the recruitment, the salaries, all these things.

"I did that until 2004, and then we were taking some subsidiary and starting up our own distribution channels in some countries, so I took over all European sales, which was my first time as CEO of Unibind Europe. Then in 2007, I took over the production plant here because we were growing and so was the position. So in 2007 I was CEO of the plant in Belgium and responsible for Europe, Asia, and Africa."

Esmeralda set about changing the mentality of staff and the business from an office focus to a customer focus, which soon led to the

"We are working with exclusive distributors in each area and we have a specific model because we believe that when you focus the people on one thing they're good at, you get the best results."

- Esmeralda Peleman

development of a major client for Unibind. "My sister, co-CEO of Unibind, has been living in the US for 15 years, and in 2006 she closed a contract with Apple to make the books for them. Steve Jobs himself chose our cover and to work with us. That was a huge change of mentality, meaning we had a huge customer telling us which material we had to use, how the cover had to look, how it had to be packed, and where it had to be delivered. So going from make to warehouse, or stock, we had to produce made-to-order and fully customised goods, and that was a huge change.

"It took us two years really, because you have the commercial people that liaise with the customer and then you have production, which is sometimes not used to working with specific requirements of the customers. Also the quality standards were much higher; not that we didn't have high-quality standards, but Apple is not an easy one. It was >



certainly tough, but it definitely made us grow.”

With the company’s long-standing history in the industry, Unibind has developed a very specific model that has carried it through the years. “We are working with exclusive distributors in each area and we have a specific model because we believe that when you focus the people on one thing they’re good at, you get the best results. Everything around them that they don’t like to do, try to find people that are good at it. In sales, that means we have a team doing telemarketing, making appointments; we have a team in the field who are the hunters, so they find new customers; and then we have after sales, which is mainly call centres and some team members who visit customers.

“Thirty-five years ago, printers and copiers were facing the same challenge as we are still facing now. Now everybody needs

printers and copiers, but binding machines, not so much. We had to learn about people that wanted to bind, and for that you need direct sales, you need people that can show the customer what it is and explain why they need it.”

One of the key challenges of Unibind stems from the increasing digitalisation of society and the public perception that paper is becoming obsolete. “Everyone knows that when you send out an offer to somebody, that person receives 50 or 60 emails a day, and after two or three days when you have to remember where that email is, people forget about it or it’s not a priority any more. If you give them a printed and bound document, it stays on their desk. People don’t throw it away that easily—it takes some time.

“Because we have that specific model and we’re looking for distributors, our sales are organised through that. We have export managers that we call

business development managers, and they are appointing new distributors and following them up. And then we have training centres. When people start distributing Unibind, they come to Belgium, they go through training about the business model and sales, because we really need salespeople. It’s not just account management and keeping up the relationship; you need to be able to close the sale to start the order and then give the right service to keep the customer; you need to be really sales oriented.”

As a family business, Unibind is built on key values that define its operations internationally. “One is respect for everybody—not only your customers and stakeholders, but your suppliers and your employees. And loyalty and honesty. Those are the classic values. I think if you asked, everybody would tell you the same. Then there’s partnership, particularly with suppliers. Our relationship with our suppliers is

“We have distributors that we’ve worked with for 35 years, and if you asked our distributors how it feels to be part of Unibind, they see themselves as part of the Unibind family.”

- Esmeralda Peleman



the same as it is with our customers and our distributors. We have distributors that we’ve worked with for 35 years, and if you asked our distributors how it feels to be part of Unibind, they see themselves as part of the Unibind family. We, as a family, always look for long-term relationships that are win-win for everybody, which is important and helps you build something together.”

Unibind works closely with its suppliers to create a feedback channel for continuous improvement. “On the floor, when your goods are coming in, it is checked and everything is kept in a logbook and updated. If there are problems, we sit down immediately. I think it’s also important that we’re not immediately there to say, ‘our credit notes’, ‘our this or that’—we really work together.

“We understand sometimes that they have problems in production or supply, so you work together and you understand each other. I think

that’s key. Of course, with your key suppliers, you always have two or three parties that you’ve been with for a long time and sometimes one has the main contract and someone has the other, but if you talk to our suppliers, all of them will say there is a continuation in the relationship.”

With a strong history in the binding industry, Unibind believes in creating loyalty, stability, and continuity across the organisation. “We have an R&D team and my father is still the driving force. We have our technical director who’s been with us almost 10 years, and before him was someone who worked with my grandfather. He retired five years ago, but every week he still comes by to visit everybody and offers his advice for making things, adapting, and developing new things.

“These guys who’ve worked 45 years in the company, they didn’t always write everything down, so over the years we’ve been making things more professional so that things are not lost, and

we’ve created a very stable team. Demands are coming from our customers, or we see things that have to improve. We move these to our R&D team, and my father still follows it up very closely to coach them and make sure that the continuation is there for the following years.”

Many people believe paper is being phased out with the proliferation of digital media, but Esmeralda believes the industry is simply changing. “Documents have to have more value than 10 years ago, so it can be seen as more exclusive in a business environment and a personal environment. People think paper will disappear, but we’re printing more now than we did 10 years ago, so it will not disappear that easily. You can say whatever you want, but having a printed document in your hands, like a book or a presentation, gives a different feeling from seeing it on a screen. We still have growing potential in these more exclusive applications, so we are absolutely not worried about disappearing from the market.” •

BN COVERMATERIALS

WE COVER THE WORLD

BN COVERMATERIALS: We design and produce numerous covermaterial collections for retailers worldwide. Our products are suited to a wide range of applications, from book covers to luxury packaging and from menus to photo albums. Anything you like: We will cover it.

Please visit our website which provides a overview of our commercial Balacron and Balatex collections.

www.bncovermaterials.com

