

“Informality Is Crucial”

So says Heineken USA's quite young and fairly new CEO, who doesn't like to wear ties and isn't comfortable in his big office. He is, however, prepared to lose money in order to make more.

JUST CALL HIM “DOLF”—NOT “MR. VAN DEN BRINK” or “Sir,” and forget about “Rudolf”: “If you call me that, then I get the feeling that I’m in trouble,” Dolf van den Brink says with a laugh. The 37-year-old president and CEO of Heineken USA, a subsidiary of Heineken N.V. (Netherlands), is on a first-name basis with all of his employees: 100 at the White Plains headquarters and 500 across the United States.

“Informality is crucial,” he says in Dutch-accented English, one of the five languages he speaks fluently (the others are German, French, Spanish, and his native Dutch). “Informality makes a company better because it provides a safer environment for more junior people to speak their minds, to share their ideas, to come up with suggestions.” He’s not even a tie kind of guy.

Van den Brink’s laid-back style was probably an advantage to the company in October 2009, when he became Heineken USA’s third head honcho in three years. He assumed the reins from Don Blaustein, who had held the position for two years and abruptly left the job the previous August. And that was after Blaustein’s predecessor, Andy Thomas, exited Heineken in basically the same manner. Industry scuttlebutt blamed both departures on friction between the U.S. satellite and the Amsterdam mother ship, as well as declining domestic sales.

Heineken Lager’s 2009 retail sales had been down 13 percent, according to market-research company SymphonyIRI Group. Heineken USA’s smaller Mexican portfolio, led by labels such as Tecate and Dos Equis, had fared much better, but not well enough to make up for its flagship beer’s losses.

Homegrown van den Brink was brought in to turn things around and do battle within the ranks of the upscale-beer segment, which includes import specialty beers (St. Pauli Girl, Löwenbräu, Corona); craft beers (Captain Lawrence Brewing in Pleasantville, the Lazy Magnolia Brewing Company in Kiln, MS); and high-end domestic brews (Coors, Samuel Adams). Heineken N.V.’s lineup comprises Heineken, Heineken Light, Amstel Light, Dos Equis, Tecate, Tecate Light, Newcastle Brown Ale, Sol, Bohemia, and Carta Blanca.



Before entering the business world, van den Brink earned two master's degrees—one in business administration and one in philosophy—from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. An atypical combination, no doubt. "Opposites attract, I guess," he says. "I started doing undergraduate and graduate work in business administration. I finished pretty quickly and thought that philosophy would add something to that experience." Then, in 2009, when his career was well underway, he went through the Wharton School's five-week Advanced Management Program.

So how is van den Brink running the company differently from Blaustein and

tion in the market and investing for the future. In an economic down cycle, companies' intuitive reaction is to cut their budgets. Heineken USA is increasing its marketing budgets."

The climate inside the offices of Heineken USA couldn't have been any worse than the climate outside of the offices from which van den Brink had been brought in: Bralima, Heineken's operating company in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country with a reputation for political, economic, and social tumult. At one point, however, while Congolese militants fought in the streets, van den Brink was forced to barricade the brewery to fend

"How to stay afloat in a recession while investing for the future is a nice balance to get right. Standing still is going backwards."

Thomas? "I don't know about them. For me, the key thing has been to listen. We have people in four or five offices and over six-hundred distributors scattered over this huge country. So I've been to a lot of the places. It's important to engage the organization in deciding where we're going to go as a company."

To van den Brink, that doesn't necessarily mean putting Heineken at the top of the beer heap, replacing the leader, Anheuser-Busch's Bud Light. "It's not just saying, 'Hey, we want to be number one and let's go.' It's not just where you want to end up, it's how you want to do it." Heineken USA now has a 4-percent share of the U.S. beer market; the company doesn't break out its annual earnings from Heineken's Americas region (North America, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean).

Van den Brink believes that his company's most important mission is branding. "You have to keep reinforcing the brand, keep investing in it." And in the short run, it might even be about turning a bit less profit. "It's about getting into a long-term sustainable posi-

off looting and protect Bralima's 850 workers. Van den Brink spent four years working in the capital, Kinshasa, as its commercial director and deputy general manager. "I was thirty-one and leading almost one thousand people under very difficult circumstances. I would not have missed it for anything. And I wouldn't be in this seat if it hadn't been for my time there."

His efforts doubled Heineken's market share in that country. Not bad for a guy who landed there equipped with high school French, the Congo's main language. And, for the record, he describes the Congo as "a very decent place to live. Life there isn't what people from a distance think it is. I was going into the townships every Thursday, Friday night without guards or what have you. And my kids became bilingual."

Van den Brink was no newbie to Heineken when he was assigned to the Congo. He'd already held eight positions at the company—even though he didn't seem destined for the beer biz. Raised in a family of

bankers, he assumed that he, too, would end up in that line of work. All that changed at a job fair, where he ran into a Heineken rep.

"I was applying to banks and just decided that that would not 'do it' for me. I like to be a business leader of people, which, within companies like Heineken, is included in the career path." None of his siblings chose banking, either.

Heineken rewarded van den Brink's stellar track record by bumping him up to his current position, which came with an office space the size of a football field and 16 large windows that have a 12th-floor view of a great expanse of rooftops. His predecessors had equipped it with a big flat-screen TV, a plush couch, a conference table, and a small, wall-mounted basketball-dunk thingy discreetly hidden behind wooden doors.

It turned out, though, that its existing layout and accoutrements weren't his style; he never even turns on the TV. "I don't feel comfortable in this kind of office. I'd rather it be smaller and more open, closer and more accessible to the people." Thus, van den Brink placed a full display of Heineken products on a windowsill ("so we don't forget what we're selling") and had installed a large, rectangular window that looks out into the corridor ("just to feel more connected"). He wants to add even more glass and have his door go directly into the hallway, instead of his assistant's area.

He's there, however, only half the time; the other 50 percent is spent visiting regional offices and major distributors all across the country. He planes it to not only the major cities, but also smaller ones like Albuquerque and Milwaukee, or, as van den Brink puts it, "places that tourists from Europe normally wouldn't end up in." Naturally, there's a corporate jet at his disposal at Westchester County Airport, right? "Absolutely not," he insists. "I'd rather spend the money on other stuff."

Despite his short tenure, van den Brink has made quite an impression on his Heineken USA colleagues. "He's a

very bright guy and he brings a laser-like focus and level of engagement to his work," says Dan Tearno, Heineken USA's SVP and chief corporate relations officer. "He is also very knowledgeable about the value of corporate citizenship—something that sets him apart from many of his peers."

Van den Brink may be fiercely devoted to his job, but his family (wife Sylvia, who works from home for En Classe, a philanthropic organization she founded while in the Congo, and their two daughters) tops his priority list. When not on the road, he always has breakfast with them before heading out the door at 7:45 am. He tries to leave the office by 6:45 pm to join them for dinner and put the kids to bed.

His family also came first when choosing where in Westchester to live. "I think that Rye is one of the best places on Earth to have your children grow up. It also helps that Rye is an easy twelve-minute drive to the office."

Sure, van den Brink busts his tail for Heineken, but the job isn't all work and no play. Last April, he schmoozed with Robert De Niro when, for the second year in a row, Heineken was one of the sponsors of the TriBeCa Film Festival. "We talked about the Congo and the movie industry in Africa," he says. There's also fun to be had right in the office. Every Thursday at 4:30, Heineken holds a happy hour at the company's on-premise bar, the Haystack. He joins his coworkers when his schedule allows.

Van den Brink readily admits that his position as the head of a major beer company can make for great party chat. "People love it. Beer is something that everyone in the world has an opinion on, so it's always fun."

And, of course, there are always the free brewskies. ●

Jenny Higgins is a long-time magazine editor, writer, and reporter who lives in Hastings-on-Hudson and who, from time to time, likes to indulge in a variety of beers.

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