



## In the Bag

Feuerwear began in 2005 as a diploma thesis project and has, since that time, been using sustainable methods to produce high quality bags and accessories upcycled from used fire hoses; a brief summary: In a three part company history, Feuerwear's managing directors Martin and Robert Klüsener discuss the company's beginnings, give insight into the production process of their one-of-a-kind products and explain their recipe for success.

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## From Design Student to Entrepreneur

### *Used Fire Hoses Become Best Sellers*

Old and unusable fire hoses often just pile up in fire stations. The reason: damage or simple wear and tear. Legal disposal of the durable, meter long material is not only costly but difficult and a lot of work. A few years ago, a young entrepreneur had the spark of an idea and discovered the material's potential for his bags and gear. A new brand was born: the Feuerwear label.

Feuerwehr was started by Martin Klüsener in 2005 and has specialized itself as a maker of high quality bags and accessories made of used fire hoses. Since the beginning the company has grown constantly. Today, Feuerwear sells around 40,000 pieces annually and has added belts, wallets and key chains to its portfolio to compliment its various bags. The highlight for buyers: because of the hoses' differing inscriptions and degrees of wear and tear, every product is individual and unique.

### **The Beginnings with Surfing Sails**

Martin Klüsener first came into contact with sewing as a young pupil. Excited by this craft, he first completed an apprenticeship as an assistant for garment technology and then studied apparel technology in Mönchengladbach, Germany before going on to found Feuerwehr. His main focus was garment assembly and production and, for his final thesis work, he took up a subject which now makes up the core of his activities: sustainability and upcycling\*. The focus then was, however, sailing canvases and not fire hoses as it has become today.

\*) In contrast to recycling, upcycling creates higher quality products while reducing pressures placed on our environment. .

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## The Search for a New Product

While working on his thesis, Martin Klüsener was already running a one-man operation in the form of an online shop. He sold handmade bags, with the name "Luv", which he had created in his parent's basement using old sailing canvases. His goal at the time was to sell at least one bag a day. It soon became clear, however, that the canvas sails were not truly suited to his product's needs. Finding and acquiring the material proved to be too costly and time intensive. Discarded surfing sails were too rare and privately purchasing new materials did not fit into Klüsener's recycling concept. Accordingly, while continuing work on his thesis, the design student began looking for new ideas and materials.

## Red Hot Find at the Fire Department

Martin Klüsener wanted to find a robust yet stylish recycling material which was suitable to replace the sailing canvases he had been using. It was important that it be available throughout Germany in large enough quantities. Finally it was decided upon used fire hoses. Curious about the material's properties, Martin Klüsener found what he was looking for at Cologne's local fire department. Boxes full of old fire hoses no longer being used were being stored without concrete plans for their disposal. The fire fighters reacted to his proposal skeptically at first but became all the more enthusiastic however when they saw the results.

Klüsener first steps were to cut the hoses apart and make A4 sized pieces. These standardized pieces were then sewn together into bags. Following a short and convincing test phase, the durable material was chosen as the raw material for his bags. The name and logo for the new label were also found quickly. The name Feuerwear combines both references to the origins of the material and to fashion. A graphic designer friend designed the characteristic logo. The red and white coloring refers to the fire department's colors as well as those of the fire hoses themselves.

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## Focus on the Younger Generation

When setting up his first online shop, Martin Klüsener already had the idea of creating his own label. Now he was finally able to realize this with "Feuerwehr". From the very beginnings, his target audience included young, fashionable people of the "shoulder bag generation" - people like himself. Klüsener went to markets and trade fairs; selling his products and making his first important contacts there. At that time he was still sewing the bags himself - managing a maximum of ten bags a day. The innovative idea was well received, the hard work paid off and sales of the Feuerwehr bags continued to rise.

## A First Milestone: The Sewing Factory

In order to meet the rising demand, Martin Klüsener engaged a sewing company in Poland to produce his bags. From the start, the company was able to deliver the high standards of quality demanded and still produces, to this day, Feuerwehr's bags and accessories. Looking back, the designer describes this decision as the first milestone in Feuerwehr's history. Of course, he still designs the products himself saying, "I have a long conception phase. Then I sew the product myself and test the prototype for a long time in everyday use. I'm always trying to find ways to continue improving the prototype and the final results. You might say I'm constantly sewing - in my head."

## Brotherly Support

The second milestone followed in 2008 as Martin Klüsener's brother Robert joined the company and restructured marketing and sales - another step which proved to be very important for the continued success of Feuerwehr.

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## From Fire Hose to Bag

### *Used Fire Hoses Become Trendy Accessories*

Stabile, trendy and one-of-a-kind. The Feuerwehr label offers young, fashion-conscious people interesting and innovative accessories ranging from shopping and shoulder bags or iPhone covers and laptop bags all the way to belts. The raw material: discarded fire hoses. Every hose tells its own story, has been put to thorough use, shows signs of wear and tear and has its own individual inscription and markings. As a result, every customer gets a unique product and, at the same time, is helping to protect the environment because the hoses are no longer simply discarded by the fire departments.

Sustainable actions - this has been part of the company philosophy since its inception as a thesis project by Martin Klüsener - one of the managers directing Feuerwehr today. The design student used his final project as a way to develop and create his own brand of bags. The products were to be made of recycled materials. The focus at the beginning was on used sailing canvas which was used by Klüsener in making his handmade bags. While looking for a more robust material, he finally came across old, discarded fire hoses - today the basis of all Feuerwehr products. The idea paid off: Feuerwehr now sells around 40,000 items each year.

In the end these life savers become bags or belts but before they get to that point they live a long full life.

### **Acquiring Fire Hoses Throughout Germany**

After they have been used a certain number of times, fire departments sort out the hoses which show signs of use or damage for safety reasons. These are then normally stored in mesh cages in the fire stations before they are sent to landfills. Before they can get to the landfills, however, Feuerwehr now rescues and reuses a large percentage of Germany's old fire hoses. In the beginning, Martin

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Klüsener had to contact the fire departments himself, describe his ideas for a new product and organize shipping to the Feuerwear warehouse in Cologne. With the company's growing popularity and prominence, though, this has changed. "Generally speaking, the fire fighters are happy that they don't have to throw out the hoses and that they can pass them along to us. This helps us to get an enormous amount of material sent to us from all over Germany", explains Martin Klüsener.

## Sorted by Color

As soon as the hoses arrive in the Feuerwehr warehouse, two workers sort them according to color - typically red and white. The rare neon yellow ones are collected separately and are used once a year to create the special and highly sought after "Lightline" edition. After being sorted, the hoses' mesh thickness and the rubber's strength are measured precisely. Because of their weight, lighter hoses are set aside for bags such as, for instance, Scott. Thicker, more stabile ones are turned into other products such as the belt, "Bill". Alongside the hose colors red and white, Feuerwehr's products are also available in black: the hoses are turned inside out exposing the rubber coating of the fire hose.

## The Cut Determines the Design

In the next step, the hoses are cut to size and shape. This phase also accomplishes the clearing of the first hurdle faced by a designer. Martin Klüsener uses the thickness and width of the hoses as the basis for all designs and later production stages. Both the thicker B and the slightly thinner C hoses can be used as raw material. The B hoses are exactly 24 centimeters wide when cut open and spread out - the C hoses measure only 16 centimeters. Electrical decagonal blades capable of cutting even the hardest of materials are employed in the cutting process.

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Afterwards, the hoses undergo a hot water washing treatment to ensure that they are totally clean. Then the hoses are dried on racks for two or three days before finally being tied into bundles of 10 or 20 and shipped to the sewing factory in Poland.

## Outsourcing the Sewing Process to Poland

Klüsener describes the outsourcing of the sewing process to Poland as the first milestone in Feuerwehr's history. The managing director states that there are, to this day, simply no sewing operations in Germany capable of producing Feuerwehr's special orders in the necessary quantity and quality.

Feuerwehr uses around 180 different materials. Besides straps, plastic clips and Velcro, individual materials such as rivets or zippers are used as well. Additionally, recycled tarps are used. These come from the automotive industry where they are normally found as coverings for the luggage compartment in estate and station wagons.

## Final Step to a Finished Product

The previous cutting determines which product the fire hose will become. The workers in the sewing factory only have to open the bundles and then sew the pieces together to make the right model.

## Tiny Number of Complaints and Returns

Once the products have been finished they are sent back to Feuerwehr's German warehouse. After being received, each and every product is double checked to ensure the highest quality and avoid possible customer dissatisfaction. "In 2011, we processed 60 mesh containers full of fire hoses. That's about 40 kilometers of material and there were only a minuscule number of complaints returns."

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## **Personal, One-of-a-kind Web Shopping**

Following quality control, each bag is separately photographed, assigned a unique number and is then placed individually in the online shop on the following day. This guarantees that each customer knows exactly which unique bag they will receive. No two products are exactly the same.

## **On the Way to a Better World**

Feuerwear tries to keep each step of the process as ecological as possible. Alongside the core points of recycling and upcycling, the fire hoses are washed using an environmentally friendly detergent made of renewable resources. Furthermore, Feuerwear uses green electricity from Greenpeace and balances their CO2 emissions in cooperation with the "atmosfair" organization. The managing director says, "We are not purely a green/ecological company but we try to act as responsibly and sustainably as possible. We are working to further improve this in the future as well. We have plans to have experts examine our processes to further optimize sustainability in our operations."

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## High-End and Reliable Quality

### *Bags Made of Fire Hoses – Turning an Idea into Success*

As Martin Klüsener, while working on his final thesis, defined a brand of bags whose products were made of recycled products, he was not aware of how successful his vision would one day be. Today, this business - Feuerwear - sells 40,000 articles annually. The basis for all of its products is old, discarded fire hoses. Having started off as a one man operation working towards first modest successes, the managing director knows, when looking back, that the decisive milestones would not have been thinkable without the help and support of his brother Robert Klüsener. After studying media technology and economics, Robert analyzed the state of the company and restructured many of its processes while creating completely new sales and distribution strategies.

### **Beginnings as a One Man Show**

Martin Klüsener studied garment technology and founded Feuerweh in 2005. At the beginning he made all of his bags and products on his own and took care of sales and shipping personally. He had to learn, over time, how processes such as communication and marketing worked. In fact, Robert had helped his brother to create the business plan but, at that time, they did not consider working together as partners in the business.

Robert Klüsener studied media technology and, following graduation, specialized in the field of business development. Working for several consultancy agencies, he concentrated on the development of small startups and the creation of new departments within larger businesses.

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## Later with Brotherly Support

In 2008, Robert Klüsener was considering starting his own agency. That he finally came to work with his brother at Feuerwear was, according to him, the result of a casual discussion. Robert Klüsener remembers, "I met my brother one evening and we were talking about the different ways and areas in which I could start as an independent consultant. After we had discussed a lot of different ideas, we met again the next morning and my brother surprised me by offering me partnership in his company. He wanted me to take over sales and distribution and help support his vision."

## Analysis of the State of Affairs – Potential Recognized

Enticed by the idea of working with and for himself and the possibility of helping a solid business on its way, Robert Klüsener analyzed the current state of the company and researched different operational optimizations which might make sense for Feuerwear.

Robert Klüsener was very quickly convinced that the enterprise had enormous potential and agreed to join his brother and his company. "My brother's idea wasn't new but it was economically remarkable: We take a waste product and create an article of full quality at an industrial level. Although the raw material is old or worn, a high end product - seen both qualitatively and functionally - can be made of it", says Klüsener.

## First Steps Towards Process Optimization

Robert Klüsener and his brother thoroughly discussed the plans for the company's future and introduced the first restructuring procedures which smoothed the way for the success of the company; "The main thing was to automate our processes and to professionalize distribution so that Feuerwear could later break into international markets." The first changes made included outsourcing the warehouse and shipping as well as expanding marketing activities.

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## Limiting the Product Range

The range of products has always been focused on lifestyle articles for younger people ranging from bags and belts to personal accessories. Klüsener has defined an additional list of product ideas which is to be viewed every year in order to develop new accessories for the market.

## Quality First

In doing so, the focus is not placed on different variations of one product, but the refinement to the qualitatively perfect version. "We calculate the price of the product before its production. If we think that the costs are unreasonable for the customer, we don't cut corners and save. We just do not develop the product further and turn our energies elsewhere. We don't allow ourselves to save money by skimping on quality." - clear words spoken by Robert Klüsener.

## Reliable and Convincing

"During intense discussions we considered different ways to communicate our ideas to the outside world. We, and consequently our products, have to be as reliable as the fire department and as convincing in quality as their fire hoses." says Robert Klüsener. This key element can be found reflected in the "brand key" in which the companies positioning and core statements are captured and defined. "This definition is our lifeblood and has also found its way into our customer relationships. We can only achieve this by having the strictest quality control." says Klüsener.

## New Partner and the First Milestone

In order to meet their tough quality demands and to fill the increasing number of orders, Klüsener decided that, among other things, a second, additional sewing facility should be found to assemble the products. "We looked very hard for almost a year. One problem was that to make our bags the sewing company had to employ a

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trained bag maker. Unfortunately, this profession hasn't been taught in Germany for the last ten years which meant that we weren't able to find any local facilities that could meet our needs.", said Klüsener.

Alongside the first sewing company in Poland, whose engagement Martin Klüsener describes today as one of the defining moments for the company, Feuerwehr was able to find another in Serbia. After long negotiations and seeing that the samples were of the highest quality, the new partnership was finalized.

## Marketing Tools and Product Life Cycles

Without marketing you'll have no presence. Without presence you'll have no sales. That is why Feuerwehr believes in controllable actions. The marketing tools SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and SEM (Search Engine Marketing) were set into place for the online shop.

The products always remain the focus. A selection process already begins to take place during the development stage. Every product has to be conceived and developed so that it will be able to stay in the product palette for the next five to ten years. Short lived, trendy products have no place in Feuerwear's philosophy. It can take up to one and a half years to develop a product; this thoroughness being especially important for quality and functionality. Only when every factor has been considered, can the idea for a product become a popular article with a long life.

## Feuerwear goes Facebook

Another online marketing tool which Robert Klüsener called to life is the Feuerwear Facebook account. With the help of the social network it became possible, for the first time, to communicate through an online portal directly with existing and potential customers. It has always been very important to the brothers that only they answer the questions from Facebook friends personally and, thereby, retain a special degree of closeness to them. This

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dialogue with over 15,000 fans allows them access to information first hand; that Feuerwear produces one-of-a-kind articles is especially important to the buyers is closely followed by quality, functionality and sustainability aspects.

With the help of Facebook and the surveys completed following an online purchase, the Klüseners are able to get to know their customers and target group better.

## **The Company is Growing**

The central team of Feuerwear remains clear and transparent. Altogether, Feuerwear has a total of five employees. The great successes that the company are able to show despite this small team come as a result of strict organization. The company hires external specialists to work together with the central team on the brand's success. Feuerwear works with two sewing companies which are commissioned to produce the final product and an outside shipping company takes care of distribution. One press and an online agency are engaged to take care of marketing and public relations. Feuerwear also works together with a commercial agency, employing ten of its sales representatives which concentrate on field sales.

## **Continual Optimization**

The Klüseners believe in the continual optimization of their processes. To do this, they also drive personally to Poland in order to personally see, understand and possibly improve the processes in the sewing operations. The brothers always have their eye on the market and are open and receptive to customers' wishes. Moreover, entire product series are occasionally re-worked so that, for example, improved fasteners or additional reinforcements can be integrated.

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## High Sales with Low Customer Complaints

In 2011, 40,000 products were sold. According to Klüsener, 75 percent of the articles were distributed through retail operations. Feuerwear delivers to a total of 300 retailers. The biggest sellers were the robust "Bill" belt and the 15 inch laptop bag "Scott". The rate of customer returns was only 0.3% - a number which only serves to reinforce the quality found in Feuerwear's products. In the rare case of a customer complaint, a return voucher is sent out and, once the repair has been completed, the product is sent back to the customer. Managing director and designer Martin Klüsener carries out the repair himself most of the time.

## Goals Exceeded - Expansion in Planning

Robert Klüsener feels that he has exceeded the goals that he originally set for himself. Sales strategy and product planning have already been defined into the year 2015. A major focus lies in the expansion of sales and distribution into other European countries. Since October 2011 Feuerwear is also represented in Switzerland, France and the Benelux countries alongside with Germany and Austria. Distribution to Scandinavia and Italy in the near future is planned as well.

## Cooperation and Future Plans

Martin Klüsener says, "Looking back, I can say that working together with my brother has definitely led to success. Our company is growing constantly and I'm very optimistic about our expansion into the rest of Europe. I see my brother's plans, especially regarding outsourcing, as definitive moments for the Feuerwear organization. Even today, we still discuss the design of products and focuses such as the different target groups and distribution together as a team. As far as products are concerned, I can tell you this much: We are currently working on wallets and an iPad cover. Right now we're concentrating on the final touches for our wallet."

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## About Feuerwear

Feuerwear was founded in 2005 by Martin Klüsener. Since 2008 Martin Klüsener and his brother Robert Klüsener have run Feuerwear GmbH & Co. KG. together. Feuerwear designs and produces high end bags, belts and innovative accessories made out of used fire hoses. Every fire hose has a different story to tell making each product unique. After the hoses have been carefully sorted, cleaned and cut to size, they are turned into handmade, high-quality products. Turning the old into something new - the concept known as upcycling. Used fire hoses which would otherwise end up as environmentally damaging waste are sensibly reused to make new and useful products. All aspects of sustainability are important to Feuerwear. That's why the CO2 emissions caused by shipping and transport operations are balanced together with the organization "atmosfair". What's more, Feuerwear uses Greenpeace Energy - only green electricity without fossil or nuclear energy. The names in the Feuerwear team – Scott, Dan, Bill & Co. – are reminiscent of those found in an American fire station. The Feuerwear collection of bags and accessories is already available in 230 stores worldwide. Additional information can be found at [www.feuerwear.de](http://www.feuerwear.de).

## Additional Material

Additional written information about Feuerwear and their products can be found in the profile marketing press center at:

<http://tinyurl.com/6xdkt3o>

Images can be found by clicking the following link:

<http://tinyurl.com/6euoqz9>

For further information, more images or to contact Feuerwear's management please don't hesitate to turn to:

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