



**A new CEO for KCI:  
Thijs Elshof, a continuation of a  
visionary pathway**

**As part of our Jubilee program, Thijs Elshof, who has worked within the KCI Group for thirteen years and became the KCI Group CEO in September 2013, was interviewed. He talked to us candidly about KCI, the company's history, its evolution, its focus, the people, and the company's future. Here is what he had to say.**

*By John Butterfield and Gillian Gane*

"In our twenty-five year history, KCI has been through a lot of phases", Thijs begins. At the very beginning KCI produced just one title, in Dutch, targeted at a very limited audience. The last twenty-five years, however, has seen this change dramatically, and today our print and/or online publication titles include not only Dutch, but also English, Chinese (Mandarin), German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese languages. Similarly, the number of staff working within the organization and offices has multiplied. A further, major, change has been in the types of media used where one magazine has developed over the years into a vast variety of printed and online publications, websites, newsletters, conferences and exhibitions, trainings, apps, and so very much more. "The simple magazine maker has emerged from its cocoon to become a fully-fledged international multimedia concern that thrives on collaboration and partnerships as with such leading organizations as the Messe Düsseldorf and the Materials Technology Institute. We have, through our talents, opened up to the possibilities and challenges offered by the marketplace to our advantage."

### **Doing business**

"The way in which we do business has also changed. Twenty-five years ago, the focus of most publishing houses was inward looking. They produced publications and dictated the information that was available to customers and the ways in which this was distributed. Certainly, we were no exception to this way of thinking then. However, nowadays, in a world where

the supply of information is limitless, the key to our success lies in providing additional quality to the information and services that we offer to our clients – effectively in tailor-making our products to the client's own needs. Not without reason, therefore, have we established regional offices – in Germany, Canada, China, and Brazil in addition to the founding office now located in Zutphen in The Netherlands. We have done this in order to be closer to our clients, end users and the marketplace. If we want to do business in China, then of course we can fly people from Amsterdam there but, to be effective, we need to have local people in position to not only handle the local markets but also to understand the local language, culture, and mentality."

"As a company we also have multi-national staff. This means that even in countries where we do not have a permanent presence we have staff in-house in our various offices who can talk to clients in their own native language, for example in Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Croatian, and French for, in short, the media now available have changed and so have the ways we approach our clients. We have progressed tremendously as a company."

### **Choices preference is king**

With regard to media advancement, Thijs explains: "Today people want choices and to have control over what media channels they use, each having their own preference(s). One person might like to sit on the couch with an iPad or communicate through conference calling whilst another would rather shake hands at trade shows.



Our job as a broker of knowledge and information is to offer our clients different ways of communication to suit their needs, not for ourselves, but for the good of the industry. If they want an app, we will make an app; if they want to come to trade shows twice a year we will hold the two trade shows. Choice preference is king.”

When I started at KCI thirteen years ago, people told me that printed media was at the end of its life span because of the rise of Internet. Despite this, we still have a very strong position with magazines and newspapers because so many people still like them. They enjoy having a magazine in full color right on their desk. This does not dispute the fact that the growth of online media, including social media such as Twitter, Facebook, etc., has become a crucial tool to us as a publisher. Both reside in parallel. Take LinkedIn, for example, where we have opened various communication groups. Currently there are around 8,800 members of our LinkedIn Stainless Steel World group and 11700 members of our Valve World group whereas ten years ago it would have been very hard to connect people together so easily. Our multi-media channels work very well for us, as demonstrated by the fact that many of our advertising clients don’t choose one single medium to profile themselves. They choose several: maybe advertising in print plus online banners or by sponsorship

and a stand at an exhibition. They may also want us to help them: to tweet press releases or publicize their information on Facebook. Our job is to listen and translate their communication needs so that they obtain the best possible media coverage for their products, and work.”

“The days when an editor simply wrote text for a hardcopy publication are long gone. Nowadays we can disseminate company news immediately via tweets that we pick up and deal with, and then pass them on to our followers. However, passing on information is also possible through Facebook, LinkedIn, or standard publications – whatever the client prefers. Online media has accelerated everything, not just through advanced technology, but through its wider use. The right content can attract huge audiences in just a short time span. And to make sure the client knows what is best from the vast multitude of media options we can provide sound and concrete business advice to ensure they get the best results.”

### **KCI’s uniqueness as a company**

So what makes KCI unique? Thijs: “Firstly, we have empowered our people. This means that we do not have a top-down structure to instruct people to do this or that. They can make decisions, together with a client, within the scope of KCI philosophy. This is very important. Secondly, and just as significant, is the fact that we are ‘close’ to our clients. We

invest a lot of money in meeting them regularly so that we get to know them well and understand their needs and concerns, the markets they are working in, and what help they need to find new clients.”

“We also hire people with whom our clients can have fun. We are naturally an enterprise that needs to make money, but we have always been keen to include the fun factor into doing

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business. We find it essential that our clients feel completely at home with us and can trust us, whatever the occasion. Clients like this. They have, moreover, enough stoic suppliers to deal with, so injecting a little fun adds to the business experience. This is also very different from other publishing companies who use call centers to reach their clients.”

In practice, our work ethics mean that work and sociability in our networking circles may often overlap with our team being just as much at home discussing long-term business plans in a formal meeting as attending a client party to launch a new product or initiative, or alternatively visiting a client who is sick

or injured. Our team takes a genuine interest in those with whom they work. They are “people” people and as such their days are far from the routine and laborious nine-to-five.”

“As previously stated KCI also collaborates with a number of renowned partners such as Messe Düsseldorf and the Materials Technology Institute, and together with these organizations, we have gained, and continue to gain, a better understanding of the market, which we translate into publishing products. Our concept is to prefer long-term relationships with clients, which bring greater value to them and to us since we can best work together to achieve our mutual goals.”

“Continuity, solidarity, authenticity, communicability, creativity and fair play are some of the core values at KCI. It’s very important to maintain client contact by account managers who will not change their mood every month and, who are interested in what they do.

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Clients don’t have to deal with fake sales people who come to push a product, and this hasn’t gone unnoticed by them. These values are found at all levels. From the owners who have been with the company for the whole twenty-five years, to the shareholders through to the sales and sales support teams and editors – all are in touch with clients. All these things contribute to the success of KCI.”

**Where is KCI heading in the coming years?**

“We are a very stable organization. Over the years we have seen continued steady growth year after year, even during periods of economic recession. We will soon have five offices worldwide

with around seventy people in action. Our goal, however, is not to be big, but to be good at what we do and to be solid. Our success is based on the people who make up our team – knowledgeable, intelligent, service-orientated, and inquisitive staff who can connect with clients is an area we will continue to invest in. We would rather do it smart than try to be the biggest. We play it smart with smart products and smart people.”

“We see a rapid acceleration and big changes in everything online, from social media, to the way websites are designed and the way information is disseminated through online channels. This is something we are constantly working on to create products and developing ourselves. At the same time, however, we want to maintain the traditional ways of communication that are still so popular and near to our core like visiting trade shows where people like to meet up in the business arena.”

“Our plan for the future is to expand into new areas, new markets and new geographical areas. I already mentioned a plan to open an office in Brazil to benefit from the Latin American market. We also plan to delve into the topic of Managing Aging Plants, especially in the global chemical industry and this will be followed by a premier event in the

Messe Congress Center in Düsseldorf, Germany, 3- 4 March, 2015.”

“The most important thing for us is to diversify and to create an even more stable environment, whilst maintaining quality on existing products, and coming up with fresh ideas too. We know our current market very well, but can we equally diversify into new market areas?”

**What makes our CEO tick in business?**

“I like new business, I am excited about what the future holds and I am looking forward to the new things we can work on alongside our current brands. I further want to maintain KCI’s strong position in the media marketplace. And most of all, I want a stable company to continue to service our customers with added value information and networks.



**About Thijs Elshof**

Thijs Elshof, 37, has been with KCI for thirteen years. He started as an online media representative and later became a manager, travelling extensively to the US and Japan to visit clients and trade shows. When a manager was needed to look after the company’s US business Thijs stepped in, and so began a new chapter in his KCI career. In 2009 he set up the KCI Toronto office, which now has a staff of ten people. He became a shareholder in KCI in 2010 together with Robert-Jan à Campo and Ladan Pourtork and, in September 2013, was promoted to CEO of the KCI Group. He lives with his partner, Marlous in Zutphen, not far from the office and enjoys long distance running in his spare time.

