

Interview Swedish Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam with Hanneke de Boer, published on www.swedishchamber.nl on 14 May 2009

Are you Swedish?

Hanneke de Boer, owner of the company Are you Swedish? and just recently member of the Swedish Chamber of Commerce. Read all about the drive and the love for Sweden and Swedish design by this Amsterdam based Dutch fashion and PR agency that represents the following Swedish brands in the Benelux: Erica Laurell, Dagmar, Gram, Camilla Norrback, The Swedish Model, and David & Martin.

What's your connection with Sweden?

My connection is my love for the beautiful design, people and language. I started learning Swedish because I liked Swedish films so much. One of my favourite movies is the Swedish film "As it is in Heaven", directed by Kay Pollak. After seeing that film I bought a language course with cd's about two years ago and started learning Swedish on my own. I am nowhere near fluent yet but I can read books in Swedish. Also, I am a big fan of Saab and have been driving one for years. Because of this soft spot for Sweden (and my blonde hair), some people think that I am Swedish but I am hundred percent Dutch. The company name is actually derived from the question I got many times since I started the concept for representing Swedish designers: Are you Swedish?

1. What inspired you to represent Swedish fashion?

It's because of my big interest for fashion, design and for Sweden. Swedes are cool, beautiful and always a step ahead in (fashion)design. It wasn't that I saw a gap in the market in the fashion-industry in the Netherlands that I urgently needed to fill. It was more that I wanted to do something with my interest for, and knowledge of, the Swedish fashion scene. I wanted to share my enthusiasm for these luxurious, high end labels and capture the "Swedish feeling" to present to the Benelux. This is exactly what Are you Swedish? is focusing on: putting Swedish fashion design on the map. By doing that, it turned out I created a niche that raised a lot of attention and "fans". The Swedish fashion market is very interesting and some of the labels can easily compete with the world's top brands. We have already seen fashion from

Scandinavia here in Holland, mostly from Denmark. But what we see now is what I call the “second northern fashion wave” and this time it contains cutting edge, exclusive Swedish brands. This high end Swedish design is very new to Benelux.

2. How and why did you choose the brands which you are representing in your agency?

I started with doing research on the internet about the Swedish high-class fashion brands. I immediately saw that Dagmar and Camilla Norrback were both beautiful, talented and promising brands. Then I approached them and went to Sweden during the Sweden Fashion Week in the summer of 2007. I wanted to get more information, made appointments with people in the fashion scene and I met some of the designers that I am working with today. I started with Dagmar and Camilla Norrback and soon Are you Swedish? expanded with other exclusive brands. These brands are now Erica Laurell, Dagmar, Gram, Camilla Norrback, The Swedish Model, and David & Martin. When we started working together they were upcoming in Sweden and immediately they also attracted good shops and a lot of press in Benelux too. People are so fond of their designs. They make clothes and designs that I feel that I want to wear myself. That’s important for me – that I am in love with the brands - since the company is my “baby” and to be able to treat the brands well and get the best results, you have to love everything about it. Also, you have to be able to be completely open with the designers. We work closely together in order to ‘conquer’ Benelux. That is how I work, and it works!

3. How are the Swedish people to work with?

Dutch and Swedes are in many ways quite similar: honest, reliable, speak English well and have a sense of humour. Therefore for me its easy to work with them. It’s also very important for me that the ones I work with believe in my ideas: that is not only to go for the quick sell, but to build the brand in a careful way and look for the right shops and magazines to be in. The designers that I am working together with now are just great and we are on the same level. Although Are you Swedish? will grow soon, at the moment I am still doing almost everything myself. That makes it even more important that I get a lot of inspiration and help from the designers. That’s something I value very much.

4. Was it hard to get into the Dutch market?

Since I am still fairly new in the business I would say that it’s still an ongoing progress. What is an advantage – I see now – is to set out and follow your business plan in your own way. I

believe that my approach and passion for the brands is very authentic and spontaneous and therefore personal. Since the company stands for the best of Swedish design, I want to build a good relation with the press and retailers. It's important that they know the story behind Are you Swedish? so they can be able to understand what I am doing and why and want to be part of that. It's also important you work in a professional and organised way. My professional background helps in that regard and the people I work with appreciate my accuracy.

5. What is the difference between Swedish people and Dutch when it comes to fashion?

Swedish people put more effort in how they look. Swedish people are fashion leaders, not followers and they actually invent the trends. It seems like they just have it instinctively. They like luxury and they also like to show it. This while Dutch people often find it more important their clothes are comfortable rather than special. This of course cannot be said of all the Dutch. But in general it's true, which you can also see when you compare how people look in Stockholm to how they look in Amsterdam.

6. I have heard that your marketing idea is going to be presented in Philip Kotlers

Marketing book, a bible for many business students. How do you feel about that?

Yes, that's true. But I am not really familiar with the book so I don't really know how to feel about it. But people around me who do know the book found it quite an achievement, haha.

What did you do before you started Are you Swedish?

I worked as a lawyer for eight years at lawfirm Kennedy Van der Laan. It has been a good time but I longed for some more creativity. Apart from my activities for Are you Swedish?, I am still a – part-time – freelance legal counsel outside the fashion selling seasons. At the moment I work at the legal department of ABN Amro Bank for a few days a week. The rest of the days - and often nights - I spend on Are you Swedish?, so the company keeps moving on. There is so much to do now that Are you Swedish? starts growing into being a serious platform for Swedish design. I like this combination. The legal work also enables me to create the financial space to further build on the future for Are you Swedish? in the way I want it.

7. Where do you think Are you Swedish? will be in 2 years?

Interesting question! I have big ambitions and plans and I am always trying to think outside the box. But it is important not to lose focus. One step at the time. I want to keep the idea that built Are you Swedish?. I believe that that the company will grow even bigger in sales

and PR and maybe work in different design areas. This could involve organising events in which Swedish design will be put in the spotlight, like a Swedish designer fair, maybe during fashion week. Are you Swedish? would be a good name for it, haha. I am already in contact about these ideas with the Swedish chamber in Amsterdam as well as the Swedish embassy in Brussels and the Amsterdam International Fashion Week. I also want to start with Swedish interns this summer, so we can do more. Furthermore, I see opportunities to co-operate with other Swedish companies in the Benelux – for example as sponsor or co-organiser of events – in order to continue putting Swedish design on the map. I believe other companies could profit from being related to the fantastic Swedish designer brands.

If you would like to read more about Are you Swedish?, please visit the website:

www.areyouswedish.com or contact Hanneke de Boer at hanneke@areyouswedish.com.