

Company visit at Christian Fischbacher Co. AG

Christian Fischbacher's most important investment decision was the purchase of a horse with carriage after having transported textiles from Toggenburg to the city of St. Gallen on foot for years. The son of a farmer, he started his modest business in 1819, when he was merely 16. Six generations later Michael Fischbacher, the current CEO, provided the participants with a brief overview of the company and a fascinating tour through the design studio with one of the designers.

St. Gallen used to be the centre of Switzerland's exporting industry until World War I and in particular the Russian revolution, after which the demand for embroideries collapsed. However, as Christian Fischbacher Co. AG was mainly engaged in woven fabrics and not embroideries, the company stayed in business.

In 1971, before the unprecedented economic growth of Japan, Christian Fischbacher Co. AG set up its subsidiary Nihon Fisba K.K. in Japan. At the time, the elevated price of the goods was their biggest issue. Yet, when economic growth accelerated, Fisba became a well-known brand for high-end consumers. Usually the brand Christian Fischbacher (or Fisba in Japan) is not visible to end consumers for home textiles and interior fabrics. However, for Japanese end consumers Fisba is a renowned brand, as it is available in department stores.

Japan is Christian Fischbacher's biggest markets for interior fabrics such as curtains, representing twice the size of Germany. However, with regard to bed linens, the Japanese market is around five times smaller than Switzerland. The company works with rather sizeable partners in Japan; whereas in Europe partners are usually small companies with around 3 to 10 employees, the main partner in Japan is Mitsui. In Mitsui's high-rise mansions, the top ten floors are usually equipped with Christian Fischbacher products in contemporary styles. A very traditional European line that covers around 20% of sales supplements this modern line.

Nowadays, Christian Fischbacher Co. AG still employs five in-house designers and one designer in Italy that cover all markets. The designers make their own designs, buy designs and get input from suppliers. Their ideas and suggestions are always complemented with market information.

As the participants went to see the designers, they got some hands-on insight on how their business works. One of the main challenges is how "crazy" a design can get. Often sales for a product deemed rather special sell well, yet, for one that would have been rather normal, sales might not be that strong. Interestingly, however, it is rather easy to decide on colours for different markets, as they clearly have different preferences.

It is difficult to tell, where inspiration for a new design comes from. For the last collection, for example, the designers went out to collect flowers and pressed them. After this, the team scanned the flowers and slightly edited them on the computer. Another design that they purchased needed a few corrections, as the leaves were only printed with two greens, instead of three that shows the dimensions. Printing the pattern on fabric is very labour intense. As demonstrated, a simple strawberry design includes ten different prints representing ten colours. Therefore, usually at least 1000 meter of fabric with the same design is produced.

For embroideries, as they are e.g. used in curtains, the design team draws a very detailed pattern. It takes a lot of time to make sure that the supplier has the right information. Yet, once this is worked out, the production is not as complex as printing. Another technique applied is hand-cutting of carpets produced from first-class New Zealand Merino wool. The designers produce three-dimensional patterns of the product for clear instructions to the producers.

After having designed a collection, Christian Fischbacher Co. AG produces samples that are shown to different retailers. This process is different in every market that they are active. In Japan, the company organizes a launch event for the collection in February, where around 1500 designers take part.

At the apéro following the introduction and tour, the participants had a look at the elaborate bed linen, carpets, curtains and pillows exhibited. The tour at Christian Fischbacher Co. AG provided them fascinating insights in the world of home textile designs. If you too are curious, visit www.fischbacher.ch, the flagship store in Zurich or a distribution partner such as Globus.

Thank you Michael Fischbacher and team for guiding us through the company and providing us with very interesting insights regarding your business, particularly in Japan. We wish you all the best for your future endeavours.



The scanned floral pattern is used for different products.

The designer shows us how she makes patterns for carpets.



Expert Advice by Michael Fischbacher

