



Make your own bed

After years travelling the world to pursue his love of marketing, it's appropriate Matthias Schuecking is now the Asia-Pacific marketing director at global travel disruptor Airbnb. He tells **Rob Grant** how he followed his heart and came up trumps. Illustration by Sara Hingle.

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The marketing world is awash with heroic tales of extraordinary brands and their exceptional achievements. Marketing books, conference papers, agency presentations and industry articles wax lyrically about companies one can only dream of working for. Not Schuecking. After analysing Airbnb as a case study on a Masters course, he called the company and asked for a job.

"When I was back at school, we were talking about primary disruptors. Airbnb was the main case. So I spoke to a friend who worked there and I said, 'Are you hiring?' I needed to find out if I could join this movement, this game changer."

To be fair, he did have an impressive history of brand management packed in his career suitcase. From the exotically named Bangkok Dining Room – a meeting room in Airbnb's Singapore office – he reflects on a journey that started in Germany in the late nineties.

Cat that got the cream

Since his teenage days, Schuecking has had a love of popular culture, especially to the way advertising shaped much of the era's zeitgeist. Smart, yet casually dressed for the interview, in a striped polo shirt, he becomes animated when recalling the brands that shaped his love of marketing.

"Looking back, what actually got me fascinated with this area were the brands and the stories they told, and how they affected a generation. I remember being a kid and seeing ads, like from Levi's in those days, that made a huge impression. I remember seeing the United Colours of Benetton's ad campaign, which was not so much about the fashion, but more the disruption that was different and unique."

Upon finishing his education, he looked for marketing roles in his own particular style, one that has characterised his career ever since. Instead of seeking the highest wages or the best development opportunities, he looked for categories he personally used and liked. "I had a lot of friends who went into banking or insurance, because it's a safe environment. I wanted to work for a music company. I wanted to work for a brewery or a coffee manufacturer. I wanted to work for an ice-cream company," he says.

Schuecking was granted one of his wishes. His first role was with global giant Unilever, working in its ice-cream business. It was here he realised marketing involves a lot more than making cool TV adverts. But this only piqued his curiosity even more. He says, "You pretty quickly realise that it's hugely complex and it's not just advertising; there are so many disciplines. I remember my eyes were opened to the levels of background, investigation and knowledge required to come up with great ideas."

It was also in this early role that, despite being part of a highly structured multinational, Schuecking developed a taste for doing things differently. He describes an early success with a new individually portioned product for Germany's Langnese ice-cream brand, which disrupted traditional channel thinking. "We managed to create this product and had to get it out there. I had seen where people go every day, to the biggest coffee shop chain in Germany, and struck up a conversation with the guys. We formed a partnership and I think it was my first experience bringing a product into the market and doing it in a new and different way, instead of just pumping out big advertising bucks."

A personal journey

Over the following decade, Schuecking hopped from Europe to Asia and back, with Unilever, searching at every turn for opportunities to grow his knowledge base and contacts. In local, regional and global roles, he worked on brands with entirely different targets and strategies.

His first of many forays into personal care was with the Dove brand, now famous in marketing circles for its purposeful approach. Having worked in the fun world of ice-cream, it was a huge awakening. "It was the first time I got in touch with a brand that was so driven by making the world a better place. It added value by addressing self-esteem issues among women and young girls, rather than just selling another product and pushing things onto the shelves," he says.

When asked how easy it was – as a guy – to work on an explicitly female brand, he is unequivocal that it held no barriers. "It was about how the media and

Career timeline

GERMANY

1999-2005: marketing officer, ice-cream and frozen food, Unilever

2005-2007: assistant brand manager, Dove Europe, Unilever

THAILAND

2007-2008: brand support manager, Ponds Global, Unilever

GERMANY AND SINGAPORE

2008-2012: global brand manager, Lynx/Axe, Unilever

SHANGHAI

2012-2013: senior brand manager, Skincare, Unilever

SINGAPORE

2013-2014: marketing manager, Unilever

2014-present: head of marketing Asia Pacific, Airbnb

beauty industry puts pressure on people. It's not just women. It's the same for guys as well. You see *GQ* or *Men's Health*. So, it was not a disadvantage, because if you want to be a good marketer, and you want to create great work, you'd better understand your audience, their habits and attitudes."

With his next move, Schuecking mixed things up in more ways than one. He went from a regional role to a global one. He moved from Germany to Thailand. He swapped high-minded purpose for an old-school, personal care approach, on the Ponds brand. "It was quite a shift. From a brand that talks about real beauty and self-esteem, to one that talks about whitening your skin and rekindling the love of your husband within seven days!"

Culture shock it may have been, but Schuecking fell for Asia big time. One motivation for the move was to experience a new region as a marketer. He quickly realised it was the place for him. He says, "It was

the first time I had ever been to Asia and it was a bit of an eye-opener, widening your horizons and embracing a new adventure with a completely different set of people. It was as exciting as could be and I have been in love with South-East Asia ever since. Not only the people, everything. It is so different to what you experience in Germany."

Finding the net

Several moves through Unilever's global personal care business later, Schuecking found himself in Singapore, once again looking for a new challenge. "I think as a marketer working in a big company you can get good at what you do, but you can also get quite complacent. It's hard to continually challenge yourself," he says.

Rather than shift to yet another new role or market, he decided to address what had emerged as a weakness in his skill set. Like many marketers across the globe, the digital world was swamping every aspect of his working and personal life. He felt a compulsion to better understand how it worked.

"I realised with the changing media behaviour – with smartphones and everything possible on the internet

“ Although Airbnb is a big risk taker, it is also highly driven by data. ”



Pictured: Former Sydney Swans player Jude Bolton promotes the SCG becoming the biggest property listed on Airbnb in the world. Localised joint-promotional activity has been an important part of Airbnb's country strategy, including partnerships with Mardi Gras and Dyson.

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– there was a massive change happening in people's behaviours and the sources of information they were using. I did not feel I was keeping up to speed with the changes and really understanding what opportunities come with it. I did not feel I had the right skill set to write a really good brief or judge creative ideas for digital executions," Schuecking says.

Enrolling in the Masters in Digital Media Management (run by Hyper Island, in conjunction with the UK's Teesside University) was a game changer. Schuecking regrets not doing it earlier. Not only did he learn how to engage consumers in a digital world, but the course also sparked interest in his eventual employer. Although, as a veteran traveller, he was no stranger to Airbnb.

"It's an interesting story. I had actually used Airbnb before there was Airbnb. In the late 90s, I read in a magazine about a lady in New York who rented out a bunk bed in a spare room. I thought it sounded an affordable way to go overseas and check out New York.

Top five tips for marketers

Have a plan and form strong internal networks.

Continually challenge yourself; avoid complacency.

Stay curious and be on top of changes in your field.

Be truly passionate about adding value.

Follow your passion; do anything for the sake of a good idea.

So I did. Then I forgot about it until a few years later when I read about Airbnb and the whole sharing economy. It made complete sense to me. I jumped on the platform and used it on both sides (as renter and landlord)."

Living in Singapore, the Asia-Pacific headquarters for Airbnb, Schuecking had made several friends who worked for the company. All of them raved about its culture and provided the internal contacts he needed to mount a campaign to work there. Fortunately, the timing was good. Airbnb was at a time in its evolution when it needed specialists and marketing was one of those areas. Schuecking recounts, "When I joined, they had reached a size where it was important to bring more

specialists and fewer generalists on board. The marketing specialists required brand development and building expertise. Coming from a marketing heavyweight like Unilever, I benefited from this."

With all the stars aligned, Schuecking landed the Asia Pacific marketing director role, after a vigorous selection

process, despite having no hospitality, start-up or tech experience. Once again, he was working on a brand he passionately consumed.

Disrupt or die

When a company is heralded as the archetypal case study for disruption, it had better live up to the hype. It's even more vital when, despite all the attention the brand receives, the actual marketing budgets are pretty thin. Schuecking loves to talk about the culture of Airbnb, which starts and ends with disruption.

"This is a start-up," he says. "We are quite conscious of the money we have available and actually having a licence to disrupt. As an industry disruptor, we go about redefining how we do marketing in a smarter, more relevant way."

Employees at Airbnb need a healthy appetite for risk, in order to pursue the company's mission to disrupt. But it's not sufficient to merely take risks; you need to learn from them, as Schuecking explains. "Everyone is talking about failing as a chance to learn. I see the companies that are really successful actually walk the talk. They embrace failure, quick failure. If you make a mistake, clearly determine what you learned, and share that across the organisation. That makes successful companies."

Somewhat paradoxically, although Airbnb is a big risk taker, it is also highly driven by data. Hosting millions of people yearly around the world generates colossal amounts of information and Schuecking has learned to explore the numbers behind any decisions he makes. "There's an absolute addiction to data and how data

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informs decision-making, strategy and the day-to-day. If it's not measurable, it doesn't count. When it comes to things like 'brand love' that's quite difficult. But there are ways," he says.

Beyond interrogating its information, Schuecking describes how Airbnb makes maximum use of its users, as advocates and storytellers. His job is essentially to harness the love of the community of hosts and travellers, to make them talk about their experiences. "When you're using a soap or deodorant, you're not going to tell your neighbour. But when you're staying at an amazing Airbnb and your host gives you fantastic tips, that's what you're going to tell your friends about," he says.

This focus on the user shapes all of Airbnb's marketing. Schuecking illustrates this idea with an initiative last year, when Airbnb gave \$10 to 100,000 users and asked them to use the money in an act of kindness. An interesting use of a \$1 million advertising budget. Of course, they were encouraged to report back via social media and this was amplified. "I think this was quite disruptive, quite unusual and a very interesting experiment," he says.

Join the movement

He is too polite to say so, but there is a sense Schuecking feels he spent a little too long in big corporate land. Certainly, he's effusive in encouraging marketers to explore career possibilities beyond the norm. For marketers considering a move into the start-up space, he offers a few words of wisdom. "Follow your passions. Be prepared to bring to the table a sense of process and structure. But be prepared to throw that overboard for the sake of great idea," he says.

The types of people he likes to recruit are hungry to disrupt and try new things. He looks for strong skills and examples of creative excellence. More so, he loves marketers with a belief in what they do.

"I hire people with passion. If you join a company in the start-up world, coming from a company like I did, you need to strap in. It's incredibly exciting. It's incredibly fast. It's a hell of a ride. But it's fantastic!" 

Bookshelf

Seven books marketers should read:

Hacker, Maker, Teacher, Thief: Advertising's Next Generation – Creative Social

Breaking Through – Sandra Vandermerwe

Disruption: Overturning Convention and Shaking Up the Marketplace – Jean-Marie Dru

Start With Why – Simon Sinek

The Art of Travel – Alain de Botton

Hegarty On Advertising – John Hegarty

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team – Patrick Lencioni