



Special thanks to Ligne Roset studio (www.ligne-rosset.cz) and the Cornelianni boutique.

Philippe Riboton

THE HEADHUNTER

The stewardesses recognize him – Philippe Riboton roams the sky between Prague and Paris at least twice a month. After the revolution he established a cult business and lifestyle magazine The Prague Tribune and became part of the local business community. Today he „hunts“ bright and talented executives across Central Europe. For instance for the iconic fashion and luxury goods company Louis Vuitton – who is about to open a spectacular new flagship store in Prague.

text *Monika
Mudranincová*

photo *Petr
Kozlík*

What did you think when you first landed in Prague?

I first came to Prague in 1992 and I immediately saw a great potential in this place. It was the time for enterprising. Anyone with a bit of a sensible idea could find the space for it. I pursued a crazy project and I made my way through too.

Was this crazy project The Prague Tribune magazine which you founded and published for several years?

Yes. It was and remains a very unique experience for me. I knew I wouldn't be able to do this anywhere else. Don't forget that shortly after the revolution there were no magazines in Prague of the Western style. The Prague Tribune was a magazine focused not only on business, but also on lifestyle. In its category it was the only one in Prague. And on top of it bilingual – in Czech and English. I was very lucky that I met young people who shared my vision: it was a matter of heart for them, they had this special creative „chemistry“, they all wanted to learn new things. During the times of production deadlines, people literally moved to the office. They ate there, slept, dated... Those were unrepeatable times.

So why did you close it down after 12 years?

There were two reasons. First was an issue with advertising. As long as we sold advertising directly to clients, everything was fine. But time after time media purchasing switched into the hands of so-called media agencies; unfortunately those

never showed any respect for our product. All I ever wanted was to make a product for readers. However, the magazine market became a market for advertisers. How can you make a respectful magazine for readers that is compatible with dodgy requests of advertisers, media buyers and PR agencies? You simply have to prostitute yourself. And I didn't want this. Not even for the magazine I loved.

And what was the second reason?

The digitalization. People started to think: why should I pay for something which I can read freely on the internet? These two reasons – the twisted advertising market and the emergence of free information over the internet – caused that at the end of 2000 we started to lose money and I ultimately had to shut down the magazine.

So, do the print media still have a future?

Yes, they do, but they will be different than they were. Can you see how the media world is changing? Jeff Bezos, the founder of e-commerce giant Amazon recently bought one of the oldest American newspapers The Washington Post! If the printed media should further exist, they will simply become one of the tools of diversified businesses.

And do you buy printed newspapers?

Of course I do. I read Le Monde, Liberation and the Financial >>>

citystranger in the city



» Times almost every day. I read The Economist almost every week. And once in while I read Businessweek, Forbes or Fortune. Almost religiously I buy Vanity Fair. I love their way of writing, it is my most favourite magazine.

You are currently the head of HR Partners, a company focusing on headhunting. You search for highly qualified people for some specific positions on the Central European markets. How does such „hunting“ look like in practice?

I believe you need to have some sort of instinct for it. Let's say that I'm building the sales team for a luxury goods and fashion company. How do I tell who is potentially suitable for such a job and who is not? Usually it takes about two minutes. If the person gets my interest in a record time to get me hooked – similarly to the situation of selling me a unique piece of jewelry or an expensive suit – and if he or she wants me to learn more about him or her, then he or she is very likely to advance in the selection process.

What kind of prerequisites does a sales executive need to have to get a job in such a luxury boutique?

First of all he or she must have excellent education and speak several languages fluently: he or she must know the etiquette code, offer perfect presentation, have good manners and high social intelligence, and last but not least have a good sense of humour and personal charisma. For sales professionals who sell luxury jewelry or luxury ready-to-wear for example it is also very important to master the whole „dance“ around the sale. Selling luxury goods is a proper ceremony during which the sales professional normally does more than the storytelling around products and brands. Customers do not only purchase a luxury product: they want to have an emotio-

nal experience. Therefore my job is to look for sales professionals who can communicate this emotion, invite the customer to „dance“ with them through the store, listen to the story and then leave with a couple of shopping bags – even though a few minutes ago they had no intention to buy anything.

Is it difficult to find people in the Czech Republic who can manage this?

It is difficult everywhere. Particularly here because we fish in such a small pool. Indeed there are only a few top brands in fashion or luxury goods operating themselves (whereas most are represented by franchisees) and only very few real senior professionals who are able to work for them because they share the same standards. Such companies are very demanding: apart from all qualities that I mentioned, they often request their employees to have lived and worked for some time abroad. And this reduces our selection even more. So we really do have to properly hunt such people.

And where do you hunt them? I suppose you don't get them with advertising, do you?

Lower management can be addressed through job boards over the internet or partnerships with private schools or universities for example, but higher positions require a different approach. These are usually people who enjoy a well paid position somewhere else. I'm in the situation of selling something to them – convince them to become interested in another work than the one they are doing right now. In a way it's like trying to date a married woman. The lady is engaged somewhere else and I must convince her to be interested in me.

How do you motivate candidates? With money?

No, never. I believe a good headhunter must be able to

*Musée Grévin.
Recently Philippe Riboton composed the whole managerial team for Grévin Prague (a daughter company of the French entertainment group Compagnie des Alpes).*

listen first. He is not a car dealer who wants to sell you an old clunker at any price. In my profession you have to first create a space for communication to make the person open up and speak. Everyone is normally unhappy with something at his job. One can love his job, but hate the boss; another has a great team but doesn't like the product, or one faces disbalance between the level of contribution and the level of remuneration. Sometimes the market is just not inclined to the sector in which one works. Thus it is important to tap on these frustrations or reserves about the current job people do and then only sell what my client has to offer. First, I put my feet in the door and then only do I try to make the person get interested in what my client has to offer. When he/she snatches it, there is a reasonable potential he or she could accept a job he or she would not have thought of beforehand.

Fine, but it takes us back to the same question: where do you find such people?

The best professionals in the luxury segment usually circulate between the top brands who have fully owned operations (instead of being represented by franchisees). Others I search for wherever. For example I hunt smart young Czechs and Slovaks where they study. Some study at schools in the UK, France or Italy for example, where there are MBA programmes specialized in luxury brand management. Therefore I will wait right there at the door with my offer to come back to their homeland when they graduate and work for my clients.

Currently you are hiring people for the new Louis Vuitton flagship store in Parizska 3, where it will move from its current location at Parizska 13, and will occupy three floors. It is the most anticipated event of the year in the luxury business in Prague. It must be an exciting job, isn't it?

For sure it is. If one wants to work in this segment, then there isn't a better company to work for than Louis Vuitton. I search for people from the position of sales associate to the position of sales manager in the boutique. In fact I build the entire additional team needed for that expansion. I strongly believe that I will find people with a similar enthusiasm and talent as in the times of The Prague Tribune. What I most enjoy about my work is the fact, that I try to bring something new to people's lives. It's a great feeling when someone comes to you after some time and tells you that you brought him or her an opportunity that changed his or her life.

You commute between Prague and Paris for about 24 years. How is your Czech?

Bad. I really regret so. I have Czech friends, so I quite understand, I can read the headlines in the newspapers. And I promised myself I would finally take some lessons. I believe I will never leave Prague. I like it just the way I like my native Paris or places such as Venice or Rome. Even after twenty years I am still fascinated by the gardens at the Prague Castle, the narrow little streets of Mala Strana, as well as some of the sceneries of the Vltava. My children were almost born here ... Prague is my most beautiful love story and will continue to be till the day I die. **C**

Philippe Riboton

Managing Partner of the executive search and human resources consulting firm HR Partners, a graduate of the Institute of Political Sciences in Grenoble and a former journalist, he established the bilingual magazine The Prague Tribune in 1993 and published it until 2005. At the same time he co-founded and served as the general manager of the recruitment firm Synergie. Currently he is focusing on headhunting Central European professionals for clients from all over Europe through his own company HR Partners. Recently he put together the whole management team for Grévin Prague (a daughter company of French entertainment group Compagnie des Alpes), and is now building an entire team for Louis Vuitton - who will open a complete new flagship store in Prague later this year, offering not only leather goods and accessories but also ready-to-wear for men and for women. Philippe Riboton has two children, a daughter, Juliette (19) and a son Julien (13), who lived in Prague during several years. He's „happily divorced“ and madly in love with a Kazakh-Australian woman, who lives and works in Prague. He just celebrated his 50th birthday.



Business and Lifestyle. The Prague Tribune's baseline "Business, Money, People" was illustrated through stories such as the one in this issue on consumption trends with Czech households.