



André Fischer

INTERVIEW: PATRICK GROSSMANN
FOTOS: BENEDICT HELLWIG & TOM WAGNER

„We analyse underlying requirements, not fashions.“

September 20, 2005, Berlin. The offices of the Product Visionaires headquarters radiate a practical atmosphere. Its Managing Director André Fischer, a casually dressed 40 year-old, explained what we consumers can expect in the future - and why his company should not be thrown into the same basket as standard trend research agencies.

Mr Fischer, do robots clean your home as soon as you leave the house?

André Fischer: (laughs) No, not at all. I wouldn't even describe my home as particularly hi-tech.

OK, I have a Bluetooth interface in my car that doesn't always work properly. And I have owned one of those Japanese robot dogs for a long while. But it gets dusty more than anything. (thinks) Apart from that, I have pretty normal equipment.

On your Home page, you state the motto: „understand – design – transfer“. Give us an idea of your company's work.

Product Visionaires is what you call a creative think tank, so we always cover a huge field. We carry out qualitative research and supervise our own network of experts throughout the world – including contacts in Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, New York, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, London and Berlin. Barcelona will also be joining the network soon. We use the hotspots to detect even the slightest initial signals and changes in the outside world, before analysing and condensing them. But that's where the work really starts: interpreting, deriving and drawing the right conclusions – and ultimately developing concrete ideas and service concepts. That includes designing end user devices and applications that build on the concepts.

What criteria did you use to choose your listening posts? What makes them so culturally specific?

First of all, they were simply aimed at regions where our former shareholder Siemens has its core business: Asia, America and Europe. Then there is thematic selection. Take Tokyo and Sao Paulo: Tokyo is extremely technology-dominated and an absolute leading market in the field of mobile telecommunication. You can see things there that will take between six months and two years to arrive in Europe or the USA. Sao Paulo on the other hand is a leader in the outdoor, sports and aesthetics sectors. The Brazilians are also way ahead in terms of architecture and Internet use. They are extremely interested in new things and therefore naturally accept them very quickly. There is much greater openness for new challenges than here, for example

Since you mention that tricky subject: Why are we so behind in terms of innovation and their acceptance?

I think it's wrong to generalise: We continue to be leaders in terms of underlying research for instance. We have problems in transferring research to the development of appropriate products. Compared to us, Asians find it much easier to take risks. I don't wish to generalise, but German companies wait a little

About André Fischer

Born in Berlin on January 24, 1965, André Fischer studied Communication Engineering and Business Economics before working in the development department of various telecommunications companies. He later became a Product and Marketing Manager. In early 2000, he moved to Siemens mobile in the field of Technology and Innovation Management, before taking over Strategic Planning of the Mobile Phone Division. He founded Product Visionaires in late 2003 and is Managing Director of the company. The former Siemens subsidiary has belonged to BenQ since Siemens sold its mobile phone division and operates as a pool for ideas mainly for future generations of mobile phones. André Fischer lives in Berlin.

„Compared to us, Asians find it much easier to take risks. German companies wait a little longer before going into action.“

longer before going into action, wait for consumer surveys and field studies. You will very rarely be successful without taking risks. But there is no need to stick our heads in the sand.

What makes Berlin such an exciting location?

Berlin is simply Germany's most exciting city – on a number of different levels. It is no coincidence that Germans are very popular on the art scene at the moment. American photographers come to Berlin to take art photos. For creative people, today's Berlin is like the New York of the early seventies: a melting pot with almost unlimited space and living costs that are sensational for a capital city.

Shouldn't Moscow be included in your portfolio?

Just because Moscow is not one of our fixed locations doesn't mean we don't have our contacts there. It's the same with many other cities where we are not permanently present, but they are still on the map if need be. That includes Bombay for instance.

Give us an idea of your experts' everyday work?

Most readers will connect the term "trend scout" with hanging out in cool clubs.

That's the way they are generally perceived – and that's why we distance ourselves from that image and job description. Our experts are completely different: They are between 30 and 40 years old, must have at least 5 to 10 years' experience in the industry and have an excellent network of contacts. The aim is not just to detect those signals, but also for our company to gain access to other players in the industry.

Doesn't a company like yours run the risk of arriving that bit too late in this permanently getting faster world?

You'd be right if we really did have trend scouts. Their cycles are much shorter. The period from scouting

to market placement is rarely more than three to six months. Our timeframe is completely different and our work is much more substantial. We analyse underlying requirements, not fashions. And ideally, we offer valid concepts for them. In other words, we develop the future.

What are you currently working on?

I can't tell you, I'm afraid. Basically everything. (laughs)

Have you ever backed a completely wrong idea in your career?

I just read a good interview with someone who said that he is wrong a thousand times a day. That's the way I see it too. Of course we've backed the wrong horse before. But that's part of the game. How else can you learn?

Can't you give us a good example?

About five years ago, I was really into wearables and smart textiles and almost believed that intelligent clothes would play a significant role on the market as early as 2005. That turned out to be wrong – both in terms of the technology and its acceptance by consumers. I still believe it will come, because it's just sensible in certain fields. Self-cleaning clothes, jackets that act as displays, textiles that provide information on the wearer's physical condition – all that will happen outside the luxury goods sector for stuff like snowboard jackets with integrated MP3 players. Especially in an aging society. But for now, the industry and consumers are not ready for it.

Looking around, you can see that the company's creative approach - combining technology with organic design – is directly reflected in the unique interior design of the office.

Yes, we deliberately chose a mixture of innovative and classic styles. The underlying concept is called 'Solid: Flow'



„Self-cleaning clothes, jackets that act as displays – all that will happen. But for now, the industry and consumers are not ready for it.“

and refers to our self-perception as a company: Solid because we are measured by presentable results and aren't a bunch of freaks. Flow because our goals can't be achieved without creative freedom and flowing thoughts. I also dislike the "container office" architecture that is widespread at the moment, pretending that variability is a remedy for all problems. But it was important for us to have versatile meeting rooms, which deliberately contrast from each other in terms of their interior design, colour and mood. We have innovative concepts such as space regeneration systems that can be viewed on screen and booked by PC. Other aspects, like an Apple iChat system as the standard method of communication, did not prove to be practical. The cameras installed at the desktop made people feel as though they were under observation.

Is that why the idea of video telephony has been unable to establish itself on the market?

Quite possibly. But Japan is a step ahead in that respect. The question is whether you have to stare at the camera the whole time. You could also let the person at the other end enjoy things or experiences at the same time. You can turn the lens around and use it to record something other than yourself. The question is whether you want to watch things on the mini display on your handheld or whether it would be better to integrate a television set into the concept as a wireless function. In future, habits will be one, if not the decisive, factor for a product's success.

What do you mean exactly?

When consumer demands increase at the same rate as the features of ever more complex technical devices, a kind of reaction is inevitable: User interfaces, i.e. the user concepts, should be reduced to a minimum and designed to be as intuitive as possible. There are fully blown computers in today's mobile phones and even some coffee machines. But you as the user shouldn't

notice that, otherwise it would bowl you over.

Whatever the devices can do, they must remain as convenient to use as possible.

In the eighties, it was cool to have CD players with displays that lit up like the Tokyo skyline, let alone all the functions, dials and buttons you never used.

(laughs) As a rule, you have to distinguish between the luxury segment and mass products. They have target groups that think in highly different ways: There are those who explicitly want visible technology – especially in the field of hi-fi. For the mass market, simplicity is a general megatrend. That applies to all industries, including cars, digital cameras, MP3 players and mobile phones – especially since more and more functions are being combined in a single device.

Which is another megatrend, right?

Yes, miniaturisation, which also involves a lot of problems for users. Take mobile phones: There is a natural limit with respect to volumes, namely the people themselves. Their fingers and eyes can only be trained to a certain extent. A man with big hands can hardly use some of today's buttons.

Is it actually desirable to have all functions in one device? Surely there are risks involved if you lose it for instance.

That also depends on differing requirements, which is why there will always be all-in-one devices and specialized equipment. After all, iPods are also a status symbol. Or take digital cameras, which still have significantly different qualities. Mobile phones still don't have 10x optical zooms or an 8 million-pixel resolution.

You mean, as soon as an identical quality can be achieved, the reactionary trend would disappear?

No, not even that. It is also a question of your philosophy. People tick in completely different ways. Another point that is often overlooked is the theme of power consumption: Try using all the functions of an all-in-one



? **KrossEye – the company figure**

In addition to developing innovative technical concepts, Product Visionaires also works on developing extremely limited volumes of designer toys. One of them is the company mascot: "KrossEye suits us because he addresses the theme of contrast in an aesthetic way," Fischer explains. "Much of what we try out initially seems to be a contradiction and only makes sense after taking a second look. We work on offering solutions where others can't even see them."



„The question is: Do you want to watch a two-hour film on your mobile phone? Ultimately, the device is still mainly a phone.“



? Chip gift

The "Embracelets" product concept presented in January is a small gem you attach to your mobile phone using a strap to personalise it – a fashion that has only been seen in Asia so far.

The difference is an integrated RFID chip with its own power supply that has a unique ID, for instance allowing the assignment of an MP3 file saved on the Net. "If you give someone the gem, you also give that person the previously purchased piece of music or video in an emotionally tangible way," André Fischer explains. "We were keen to focus on the playful aspect that makes otherwise abstract technology tangible."

device: It won't last long. Compared to that, an iPod for instance is much more optimised.

What do think these communication do-it-alls will be able to handle in 20 years' time? What lies in store for us?

Technically speaking, there are no limits. It depends on consumers. The question is: What does the market want and need? Is it essential to be able to pay for things using the GSM standard in your digital camera? Do you want to watch a two-hour film on your mobile phone? Ultimately, the device is still mainly a phone. Historically, communication is one of the most important things: Only the means of communication have changed. (thinks) Charge systems will also be completely changed, shifting further towards flat rates. In a few years, it will be completely irrelevant whether I'm sitting in Berlin or Sidney – I'll still pay the same amount and won't wait any longer. There are countless possible variations other than the old individually itemed bills.

Can you think of other megatrends?

Oh, several. Some don't sound new, but are constantly expanding, like individualisation and personalisation: The urge to withdraw to the refuge of individuality automatically grows as society becomes increasingly dominated by mass products. That goes hand in hand with the theme of luxury. High quality goods are currently experiencing a renaissance. People are seeking positive experiences. Depending on the market segment, there is a great divide between the trend towards ever-cheaper products and one towards better and better quality.

So it's still cool to be tight-fisted?

Absolutely. You know the feeling if you've ever bought a cheap PC and then got completely frustrated because nothing works. In Germany, there are very clear statistics showing that luxury products are generating ever-increasing sales. The urge to set oneself apart from the rest through more individual objects can be seen everywhere – not just in the fashion industry.

Is that why your company also produces designer toy figures?

(laughs) Toys address people's underlying needs: They are the emotional opposite of our other work. Despite all this technology, there is also a general trend towards returning to childish themes. More and more people want to surround themselves with art and collect things. We need and will get more aesthetically discerning visualisation methods than what providers like Jamba are currently offering – especially on the mobile phone market.

For instance?

We approach the theme of RFID, for instance, in a completely different way than normal, namely as a lifestyle component. The fields of shopping, ticketing and health are classic aspects in society where the new wireless technology could replace or change traditional methods. Our approach comes from a different, much younger perspective.

Where do you expect the next evolutionary step in the games sector?

There will continue to be work on developing playstations further so that they reach the performance of machines at home. In addition to the ability to make things even smaller, there is still the unsolved problem of reflections that disturb visibility outside as soon as the sun shines. If displays improved in that sense, you could greatly increase the enjoyment. On the other hand, I'm sometimes shocked how real some ego shooter games look. If I think of my old C64 or Atari – we were completely innocent by comparison. ...