

Looking GOOD

Kilian Wagner, VIU Eyewear's CEO, is rethinking retail by holistically engaging with customers both on- and offline, while also pulling together the fashion and optical industries.

KILIAN WAGNER
CEO @ VIU

VIU is a Swiss startup shaking up the optical industry with premium eyewear that breaks norms through vertical integration and omnichannel retail. Seamlessly combining online and offline channels, VIU is building customer experiences that are unparalleled in the field, and offering high-quality long-lasting products at brilliant prices.

Founded in 2013, VIU is active on home soil and in the DACH market, operating more than 48 of its own flagship stores, over 30 partners stores, and several online channels. Before establishing VIU, Kilian was leading various projects at McKinsey & Company in different industries including telecoms, banking, media, and consumer goods. He focused on growth strategy and market entry, which happen to be two things VIU excels in.

When Kilian and his friend Peter Kaeser first dreamed up VIU, the eyewear market hadn't changed much for three decades. Distribution was fragmented and inef-



The end goal is to create frames that suit every personality and style

fective, and the consumer experience felt very medical, like a visit to the doctor. The CEO saw a “simple” opportunity: design the best eyewear, produce it at accessible prices, and sell directly to end consumers online. A simple strategy that has proven incredibly effective is mailing people glasses to try on at home, free of charge.

20/20 vision

“Our plan was not to build 50 stores,” says Kilian, “but we found out that many people in Zurich knew us, but did not trust that they could buy eyewear online.” So, when it came to opening their first office, Kilian added a storefront. “When we then opened that store, it was like an explosion, and we were like ‘wow there is something to this.’ Since then – August 2014 – we became an omnichannel retailer.”

This omnichannel strategy, denoting a type of retail that integrates the different ways of shopping available to customers, has been employed incredibly effectively by Kilian and his team, ensuring that VIU's customers enjoy a smoother, more involved experience, no matter how they peruse eyewear. “People are no longer limited to a single platform,” Killian explains.

This approach has been so successful that Kilian was giving TED talks about omnichannel retail by 2017 to overall audience of 32 million YouTube subscribers.

With only 4% of consumers buying their prescription glasses online, it's wrong to assume that e-commerce is killing brick & mortar eyewear stores.

“The plan was to build a D2C eyewear brand, mainly online, and partner with retail stores, a typical show-rooming concept, installing a wall in stores where we can display our products and people can order using an iPad, for example, before trying glasses on at home,” Kilian says. As such, one of VIU's USPs is a highly personalised experience based on the unique tastes and preferences of each user.

An omnichannel approach also allows VIU to hone in on what their brand really signifies. “Looking at our stores and our brand identity, we like reduction, we like to reduce it to an absolute bare minimum,” he explains. “We are always thinking about functionality. Even the logo of VIU, we feel it only has the elements that you really need, so we are always thinking about minimal yet functional ways to keep our designs clean.”

VIU prides itself on its cutting-edge technology and precision, and the company's mission is to make prescription lenses and sunglasses that fuse timeless aesthetics and innovative tech. Early on, such accuracy was hard to find, as Kilian laments the majority of the supply side mass-producing eyewear from parts made in Chinese factories: “We knew that to talk

about our brand as an authentic high-quality product, we need to work very closely with the best of the best, so we ended up with small boutique suppliers where the quality is outstanding, and we have been developing that relationship from the start.”

VIU makes its acetate frames by hand in Italy – and the company's titanium ones are produced in Japan. These two countries are renowned for their eyewear manufacturing.

Before COVID, VIU was on a roll. “We built 25 stores in 18 months,” comments Kilian. “Like everyone, however, we were slowed by the pandemic. We managed to reopen our stores during the second wave but the high street was still pretty empty. Despite this, I'm still optimistic about retail's future.”

Clear vision

COVID, however, has not changed VIU's core mission, which is to “create a fantastic product and an authentic and transparent brand.” From a business perspective, the company is still growth-focused. “We had the typical startup evolution. In the beginning you do everything yourself,” the CEO explains. “Now we are 350 people, so I've gone from a player on the field to a coach.” A lot of this coaching role is now about optimisation and driving the creation of perfect products for the customer. 🔄