



Technology Is the Enabler of Change

An interview with GHARAGE Managing Director Lennard Niemann.

One of GHARAGE’s core tasks is to build ventures and collaborate with start-ups that will deliver on Gebr. Heinemann’s mission statement of turning travel time into valuable time. Please give us an update on your current portfolio.

Lennard Niemann: We partner with and provide a strategic platform for early-stage start-ups within the travel, retail, and consumer goods sectors across Europe and Southeast Asia. As Gebr. Heinemann’s dedicated hub for innovation, we can test and develop ideas for new business models without having to draw on the resources of the entire company organization. This enables us to perform pioneering work in an efficient, flexible, and fast way. In the past year, our four main ventures have taken significant steps forward.

First of all, there is Duffle, a digital platform that aims to digitize the travel retail experience. Gebr. Heinemann came on board as the first strategic partner via GHARAGE and has been providing support since 2021. Just recently, Avolta joined Duffle as an investor. To see two international travel retailers such as Avolta and Gebr. Heinemann invest in a corporate venture like this to digitize travel retail is a great foundation to continue the journey. Digitization is also the key factor in our venture Amber Island. We have designed a web3 membership community offering exclusive access to rare and limited whiskeys sourced directly from some of the world’s most prestigious distilleries. The first physical bottles of our limited edition have just been shipped and we see a product-market fit. A second drop took place in March 2024.

What about GATEZERO and Nullpunkt – two brands that travelers encounter in the airport environment?

Lennard Niemann: GATEZERO, a concept targeting the new luxury consumer, originally started as a joint venture between Gebr. Heinemann and Highsnobiety. The Copenhagen location was the first permanent GATEZERO store at an airport. A second space followed at Sydney Airport in 2023. Gebr. Heinemann now owns and operates the brand itself through its Sales Experience & Excellence team.

With the start-up Nullpunkt, we have developed our own niche consumer brand in the trending area of functional fragrances. Nullpunkt is actually a good example of successful venture building: we created the brand, successfully tested, and launched it in multiple sales channels – and recently sold it to Daluma, a holistic well-being brand specializing in food and beauty products focused on self-care. Now, we are selling Daluma and Nullpunkt as a new category in Heinemann, fostering innovation and a spectacular assortment.

GHARAGE was established to envision and shape the travel and retail of tomorrow. How has your focus evolved or even shifted since starting three years ago?

Lennard Niemann: We started right in the middle of the pandemic when the most important thing for all retailers was to stay attractive to partners and consumers. Therefore, we made a conscious decision to concentrate on creating branding-focused, tangible ventures. This led us to projects such as GATEZERO, the development of Nullpunkt and Amber Island, and the launch of the Duffle platform. All of these consumer-facing brands are designed to make travel retail more attractive to both consumers and our partners at the airports. As we move into a post-pandemic world, it is crucial to understand the driving forces behind new consumer behaviors and what is here to stay. Anticipating what the future might look like and adapting early on is essential to staying ahead



of the curve. The changes we observe in retail today are being driven by technological advancements, shifting consumer behavior and expectations, and new competitors entering the market.

What impact will this have on travel retail?

Lennard Niemann: Travel retail is probably one of the last undisrupted industries. While downtown retail has changed with the continuing rise of digitization and e-commerce, travel retail still follows pretty much the same business model, and it's only a matter of time before disruption comes. Experience shows that technology is the enabler for market shifts, and today we see a wide variety of technological advancements with the likes of blockchain, robotics, and AI. The question is which of these will actually impact our marketplace. In GHARAGE, we get a take on what will be the most influential technologies, as we did in our "Future Fields" report published in 2023. Furthermore, we take deep dives into certain technologies within our industry as we did in the "AI in Retail" report.

Does this alter the way you work to drive innovation?

Lennard Niemann: Of course, our goals remain focused on Gebr. Heinemann's mission of turning travel time into valuable time: we want to innovate in an efficient or profitable way, and we want to lead by example as a research hub and work to make Gebr. Heinemann and travel retail fit for the future. However, GHARAGE is a living entity, evolving on its journey, adapting to change. As technology becomes even more influential, we have already entered our next chapter, which comes with more tech-driven businesses.

Venture building as we have done is great when you want to drive innovation, because it creates ownership of a start-up and therefore motivation. Now that we see the focus shifting to tech, we have to diversify a little. We will put a slightly greater focus on the collaboration with existing, external start-ups.



Of the four ventures we have built, we have externalized Duffle and sold Nullpunkt, while Amber Island and GATEZERO are firmly connected to the Gebr. Heinemann headquarters. Now, it's time for GHARAGE to be more of an instigator, a consultant, preparing for future developments.

In early 2023, you opened a GHARAGE office in Singapore. Please give us an update.

Lennard Niemann: In our Singapore office, we are represented by a small team of two, led by Darren Soh, working mainly on partnerships with start-ups. One of our investments there is Return Key, a recommerce platform that sells to sub-sellers or consumers. The international approach is important because different markets, with their specific consumer needs, trigger different start-ups. In a way, Singapore is the summary of start-ups from all over Southeast Asia. It's a great hub for variety and to get a global view of cross-border innovation – something that is essential for a global player like Gebr. Heinemann.