

Storage systems can also be sexy

Many companies are faced with a lack of storage space. Bruynzeel Storage Systems expects significant growth in the near future.

By our editor
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Alexander Collot d'Escury, CEO of Bruynzeel Storage Systems in Panningen, approaches the COO in the factory. "Have the wheels that were on the Ever Given already arrived?" Bart Sijben thinks for a moment. "They are now in Rotterdam." They have not yet reached the Bruynzeel factory, which has 200 employees and is located in the southern Netherlands.

Collot d'Escury laughs a little. Sure, it's annoying when you don't get parts in because a ship gets stuck in the Suez Canal. But his storage systems company can also benefit from such difficulties. Customers who are shocked by faltering supply during the Covid-19 pandemic, or by the blockage of the canal, come to him for extra storage systems, among other things to keep extra stock. "Companies like L'Oréal or Moët Hennessy, who want to store more labels or caps."

It is one reason why the Utrecht private equity firm Gilde decided to take over Bruynzeel Storage Systems, which was spun off from the once enormous Bruynzeel group (pencils, kitchens). Gilde believes that Bruynzeel will be able to sell many more storage systems in the coming years than just to governments, archives and museums. Now you can find Bruynzeel racks in the Stedelijk Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the recently opened Netherlands Collection Centre in Amersfoort.

Customers are sometimes afraid: can the mobile cabinets crush you?

The aim is to boost the company's annual turnover, now around 70 million euros, to 100 million euros in the coming years. This turnover is not achieved with 'normal' storage systems. Bruynzeel's cabinets are in fact half computers. They move, slide, and can be controlled remotely.

That's quite impressive, but why does Bruynzeel think the world is waiting for even more, expensive electronic storage systems? What's wrong with a regular storage cabinet?

Saving on aisles

Collot d'Escury is the man to ask. The bond director is the ex-CEO of carpet producer Desso and has been involved with Bruynzeel for just under two years. He speaks quickly and regularly gets up animatedly in his office to illustrate how the storage systems move with the necessary gestures.

The point is, his cabinets aren't expensive. That's an illusion. Do you know what is expensive? Square metres. And Bruynzeel has found the solution for that.

By using mobile cabinets, you save on aisles. And expanding your storage space with such a system is, according to Collot d'Escury, in fact much cheaper than expanding your building. To illustrate the point: A



Bruynzeel's electronic and mobile storage systems are produced in the Panningen factory.

square metre in a hospital costs 3,000 euros, a storage system for medicines 800.

The question is whether Bruynzeel has made this sufficiently clear in recent years, says Collot d'Escury. Under the previous owner, the Swedish private equity company Altor, the focus was mainly on other branches of the then parent company Constructor (with products such as pallet systems). The mobile, electronic system has been part of Bruynzeel's range for decades – but perhaps the company has focused too long on customers it already knew: archives, governments and museums.

Expensive square metres

In recent years, according to Collot d'Escury, who was also brought in to shake things up, a realisation slowly started to emerge: Everyone everywhere lacks space. The world is getting fuller and square metres more and more expensive.

Bruynzeel's plan for the coming

years is: Stop thinking like a storage systems company, but look for sectors in which square metres are valuable – or simply not available. For instance hospitals. And industrial companies that want to keep more stock, but lack space or money to expand their premises. Or stores that never want to say "no" to the customer but don't have enough space to have every size available of every type of garment.

"We investigate where metres are expensive. And then we focus on these sectors," says the CEO. This way you turn the storage system into something positive, something someone really wants, instead of a not very sexy, necessary evil."

For the time being, the storage systems seem popular, the turnover has increased in recent years. But one aspect of the electronic systems is sometimes of concern to customers: sometimes they are afraid that they will get stuck. "Do you know that film *The Lift*?" Collot d'Escury asks. He is referring to the

horror film by Dick Maas, in which a murderous elevator with guillotine doors takes victims.

A storage system moving tons of metal can make people nervous. One push of a button and you're crushed, they suspect. In fact, while the systems were already equipped with safety features, Bruynzeel came up with an extra reassurance. They have now placed a patent pending camera system in the cabinets, which monitors whether someone is standing in the aisle. If so, the cabinets cannot move.

A long way from the origin

With the electronics and metal designs, Bruynzeel Storage Systems has drifted from the origins of the Bruynzeel group. Pre-war Bruynzeel was all about wood: for cupboards, kitchens, floors and pencils. In 1983 the group was split up. The Bruynzeel Storage Systems production ended up in the south of The Netherlands. Thousands of metal shelves are now made by machines

every day. Here assignments are expressed in kilometres, sometimes more than a hundred.

Ironically, as a result of the expansion, Bruynzeel Storage Systems now seems to be heading back to one of its original activities. You might ask: where is the scarcity of square metres one of the biggest problems these days? Exactly, in the housing market. Collot d'Escury does have some ideas: for example, a prototype of a tiny house has been made in which Bruynzeel has made a kind of mobile kitchen. With these kinds of inventions, people may soon be able to live on forty square metres, instead of a hundred. Collot d'Escury: "We don't know yet if it will work, but we're going to try."