



### The Buyer's View: de Sede

# The Culture of Excellence



Switzerland is well known for several specialities including banking, of course, watches and chocolate. There is, however, another speciality: furniture, from a company that makes its product in the very best traditions of Swiss quality and design. This company is de Sede and its products are considered amongst the finest statements of high quality in materials, design and manufacturing techniques. How it produces certain aspects of its quality is a well-guarded secret (possibly another similarity with a Swiss bank account).

The company was founded in 1961 in Klingnau as a small craft workshop specialising in saddlery. Over the next thirty years the company grew to its present size - one could say it moved from one seat to another - and status by always

relying on the best techniques, quality and design.

De Sede has approximately 300 employees, with around 180 in the Klingnau headquarters. It has two centres in Germany - a factory in Bielefeld making textile upholstered furniture and an office chair plant in Stuttgart. It also has a sewing factory in Nachod in the Czech Republic. This overall development has only been possible thanks to the uncompromising devotion to the traditional values of the de Sede brand: outstanding furniture of the highest quality made to satisfy the specific needs of customers.

Company chairman Hans-Peter Fassler sums up this philosophy: "It's possible to argue about design, but not about demands placed on design. What is the use

of a piece of furniture with a visually excellent design if the owner doesn't feel comfortable in it? Or if the quality of workmanship is not all it should be?" The spectacular success of de Sede over the past thirty years has been based on a subtle blend of these three factors: comfort, design and quality.

The furniture produced is therefore not merely a design statement. The comfort and well being of its customers are at the centre of the de Sede philosophy. The furniture is hallmarked not merely by its solid construction and elegance, but it also offers the highest standards of comfort to all who use it. Ergonomic design is the key principle that guides the company's craftsmen and designers who constantly try to ensure that each individual piece of furniture is ideally sculpted to the needs of



the human anatomy. With precise determination of the correct form and hardness of the foam filling material it is possible to provide perfect support for the body just where it is needed by the user. Backrests are high, low and frequently adjustable, seating surfaces are wide, narrow or steplessly adjustable, while cleverly concealed head and footrests can be activated to provide even greater comfort. Even though each and every person may be different, each piece of de Sede furniture aims to provide the ultimate in seating comfort.

In addition to its in-house design team, de Sede also entrusts external designers with the task of developing its products. These include such famous names as Paola Piva, Claudio Bellini and Santiago Calatrava together with a number of

talented new designers.

Their work is characterised by outstanding ergonomic features, comfort and functionality in unmistakable lines. De Sede furniture falls into three distinct design styles: "Classic" catering for classically elegant tastes, "Contemporary" embodying a thoroughly up-to-the-minute modern style and "Avantgarde" covering trend-setting innovative furniture, such as the thought provoking DS 152 sofa.

All these three design styles have the common goal of creating the perfect blend of ergonomic and aesthetic elements.

### Quality

The company is based on a foundation of the very highest quality in materials, construction, and craftsmanship. This not

only gives it an edge over other manufacturers but also ensures that the whole quality philosophy is built into everything that it does. In 1995, de Sede was the first Swiss seating company to be awarded ISO 9001 certification and its environmental responsibilities were demonstrated by the gaining of ISO 14001 certification as early as 1996.

The company started in the 1960s with a tradition of leather and the use of leather remains, to this day, at the heart of its ranges and styles. The various qualities of leather offered by de Sede range from 1.2-1.5 mm full grain hides in aniline or lightly pigmented finishes, through 2.4-2.8 mm soft supple hides, up to the famous softy 0.5 mm neck leather from selected bull hides. It also offers styles in its unique Artiano saddlery bends. De Sede sources its leather from one main-undisclosed tannery and guards the confidentiality closely.

The selection and specification of the leather is key to the whole operation and starts with the raw material and animal husbandry. For de Sede, selecting the best quality of leather starts on the farm and it makes use exclusively of leather from cattle reared in ideal conditions. For this reason virtually all the leather the company processes comes from animals bred in southern Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia. The grain structure of the leather is essential to de Sede designs and is incorporated as a feature wherever possible. There is an appreciation of the natural appearance of leather with its pores, creases and scars and this is seen as an authentication of the genuine product.





There is also the fact that, as time passes, the attractiveness of the leather actually increases as it gains an extra patina, deeper creases and markings.

The tanning and finishing processes are designed to produce a soft full handle with minimal pigment cover and in order to protect the surface it is given a special treatment, details of which also remain a very closely guarded company secret. The choice of leather styles is very wide, from 1.2-5.0 mm but the company also recognises the importance of colour in the choice of furniture. Colour choice of the furniture can completely alter the feel and atmosphere of a room and de Sede has launched its Coloral Leather in more than 2,000 NCS/RAL shades to provide virtually unlimited scope for design concepts. This enables trend colours, classical shades and special preferences to be easily specified by users.

The selection of the leather is a vital process in the manufacturing chain and this is even more challenging due to the extremely natural look of the material specified. There are five separate selection and control processes between the tannery and the shipping department of the finished leather. They test for all the usual physical parameters of upholstery leather with tests in-house and at a neutral laboratory control at the Leather Institute in Reutlingen. Ecological testing is also carried out at specially selected quality control centres.

A big challenge in the selection procedure for a large unit is to ensure that

the different hides are identical in colour, gloss, thickness and structure with the various panels showing a harmonious grain pattern. (It can take up to five whole hides or more for a suite or group of furniture.) It is this meticulous attention to detail that differentiates de Sede from other manufacturers and a team of highly experienced selectors marks up each hide for any defects or areas to avoid prior to cutting.

De Sede has invested in customised automatic knife cutting equipment developed for it by Lectra Systems to handle the large and often very heavy hides. Highly skilled cutting by hand is also carried out but both systems use traditional knives as these have been found to give superior edges. This combination of state-of-art technology and the experience of trained cutters has resulted in considerable improvements in cutting value and hence cost savings.

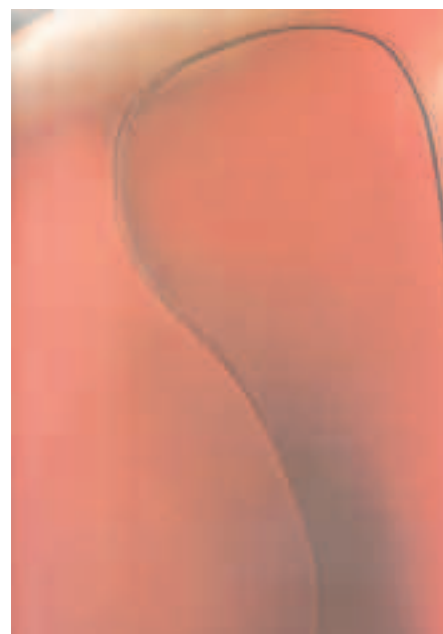
It is not only in the cutting department where there is the marriage of skill and technology. Amongst the 300 staff of de Sede are a great number of saddlers, cabinetmakers, designers, sewers and other skilled craftspeople who work in close collaboration and also have access to some of the very latest technical advances in machinery. Every piece of furniture is finished by hand and the craftspeople regard it as a point of honour to produce each new design challenge to the very highest quality standard.

The company maintains an inventory of hides equivalent to about 40,000 sq.m and

has a daily cutting quota of approximately 900 sq.m or around 100 seat units depending on style. This enables them to offer relatively short delivery times and it is claimed that there are never more than seven weeks between order and delivery.

The contract between supplier and purchaser does not end with the delivery of the furniture; de Sede operates its own repair department where used customer furniture is refurbished. The close relationships are illustrated by those customers who return their leather furniture for repair after more than 20 years of continual use. The company sometimes receives complaints but in the main these are related to the wrong treatment or, more particularly, the wrong maintenance regime with unsuitable products.

The company has prepared a booklet of care instructions and a care pack with special products for cleaning, nourishing and proofing its leather furniture. These products, Leather Softclean, Leather Cream and Leather Proof, enable customers to maintain the leather correctly and the instructions also help to improve the understanding of exactly what the leather will tolerate. General advice on protection from bright sunlight, the avoidance of solvents, wax polishes and shoe creams is given, together with tips on application of cleaning, nourishing and proofing products. The care booklet also gives detailed advice on how to deal with ballpoint pen marks, fatty spots and worn areas. (A light sponging with clean warm soft water is advised twice a year for most full grain leather types to remove dust and restore humidity. This does not apply to







Couture where a light vacuum treatment is recommended).

The use of leather is seen as an essential part of the company philosophy but it also makes furniture in other materials including textiles and the non-woven micro fibre Microsede that is used to produce an extremely fine velvet surface in a wide range of colours.

This devotion to exclusivity will be demonstrated even more clearly in the future as de Sede directs itself more consciously at contemporary modern design and the avant-garde. This policy is deliberately targeted at a younger audience in the thirty-plus age group: it will not only use designers from within the industry but also will draw on design talents from outside the furniture sector. This should ensure inspirational stimulus and exciting new ideas, for example from the automotive industry.

Hans-Peter Fischler doesn't allow the complimentary consumer study carried out in Germany and Switzerland, which showed that de Sede enjoys an excellent image, to deflect him from his intention to even further strengthen the message of the unique nature of each piece of de Sede furniture.

It is only when you know that, besides the very best leather being selected, the manufacture of a single armrest requires a dozen separate stages, for instance, can you understand the high level of craftsmanship which lies behind each and every seam. It is relatively easy to develop a genuine feeling for the real value of the product.

And, on present form, de Sede will continue to foster the Culture of Excellence. ●