



# A love for detail

BY WOLFGANG ZIMMER

**THE INDEPENDENT** Edeka shop manager Stefan Ladage spent three years preparing the conversion of his supermarket in Hessisch Oldendorf in Lower Saxony (Germany), gathering ideas to create, from a customer point of view, the perfect shop. The result is pretty impressive, both functionally and aesthetically.

At the end of March last year, Edeka Ladage in the Lower Saxony town of Hessisch Oldendorf reopened its doors after a complete conversion and extension of its sales floor. Oldendorf is situated in the catchment area of the medium-sized towns Hamelin, Rinteln, Bückeburg and Minden. In the near vicinity live some 6 000 people, many of whom are regular customers of the family business that was founded in 1890 and is now managed by fourth-generation Stefan Ladage. The store has been located at the same spot for the past 31 years.

The conversion phase of the shop took 70 days while still operating. The supermarket was only closed during the three days preceding the reopening, to carry out the last building activities and to place the merchandise on the shelves. After the extension the sales area has now almost doubled in size to 1800 m<sup>2</sup>. Stefan Ladage had been itching for a long time to rebuild the shop from top to bottom and to give it a completely new design. Finally, at the beginning of the year, he was able to set about his plan. "For 25 years we've had Aldi as a tenant in our building on a sales area of 700 m<sup>2</sup>", Ladage reports. "We ourselves occupied 1000 m<sup>2</sup>. Three years ago it started to become clear that the tenant would eventually depart. During that period I have seized every opportunity to look around and collect innovative shopfitting and furnishing ideas." It meant that taking any vacation was out of the question.

By looking around Ladage gained a lot of experience and knowhow, not least because he was looking less through the eyes of a shopfitting expert than through those of the customers. "Every time I enter a shop, I put myself in the customer's position", Stefan Ladage says. "It sharpens the sense to spot shortcomings and enhances creativity. When you make that kind of examination, you mustn't get entangled in the day-to-day business of the retailer." That way his ideas on what the new Ladage supermarket ought to look like became increasingly concrete and an extensive requirements list for the shopfitting and furnishing service providers took shape.

Eventually the contract was awarded to the shopfitting company Linde Ladenbau, which took over the project management and handled the entire conversion as a general contractor, always in close consultation with the owner. In retrospect Stefan Ladage is absolutely satisfied with



*An ambient atmosphere relaxes shoppers.*

the teamwork. "For independent retailers like us, any conversion or new development constitutes an important investment for which we have to work many years", he says. "Our customers should still feel happy in our shop in ten years time. If we want to make sure of that, we have to take our time to plan, be prepared to think suggestions through, time and time again and painstakingly enter into details. In those circumstances I expect a partner to take initiatives and bring in his own ideas."

Linde Ladenbau has developed a computer animation of the new shop for Ladage. It shows how the new sales room grew during the different phases of the conversion and what it would look like once finished. Stefan Ladage: "I have shown that

film over and over again to my staff. It made the project tangible to them, which was clearly noticeable in their motivation. The staff identified with the project. Without that positive attitude we would have hardly been able to carry out the reconversion so smoothly in such a short time."

### Computer animation

Using the computer animation, even the smallest of details could be resolved. For example: a customer standing in front of the butcher's counter should be able to look directly at the merchandise. With many refrigerated cabinets, however, he looks straight at the edge between the vertical and the horizontal glass panels. Consequently, the cabinet will have to be redesigned.

The standard height of refrigerated counters is 1.60 m. "That means that a female customer with an average height can barely see the salesperson behind the counter", Ladage says. So he ordered custom-made, 1.2-metre-high furnishings. And in such case it becomes clear how important it is to have a flexible shopfitter. Ladage adds: "To be sure, the customers are not aware of such considerations and therefore they can't really assess the amount of work that goes into it, but it all contributes to their sense of well-being. We have to communicate that kind of concepts to the customers much more than before. Indeed, we are in competition with the discounters and we constantly talk about differentiation. In store design and goods presentation lies an enormous potential for real differentiation for our kind of businesses. The customers appreciate a stylish and functional environment. Other types of business have to fall back on their standards more strongly."

At Ladage's the customers feels that he is addressed individually and that his sense of well-being is taken care of. It all starts with the red flooring of the entrance area (the "red carpet" and the invitingly high doors. Only just before the opening the decision was taken to install a second reverse vending machine to avoid queues in this area.

### Dark colour scheme

The customers enter the actual sales area via the fruit and vegetable section and



*The glass panels of the service counters offer an unimpeded view of the merchandise.*



*High-quality design in the checkout zone.*

after a few steps the whole room opens up, giving the customer the impression that the shop is getting increasingly bigger. Also, somewhat liberal use is made of the available space: the aisles between the shelves are conspicuously wide. "We could have installed over 30 metres of shelving more in the shop, but that would have meant that the aisles would have been 20 cm less wide", Ladage explains.

The customers get a good view of the shop from almost any position. There are no advertising displays hanging from the ceiling. Instead, the shelf heads in the middle of the sales room carry easy to read banners indicating the category of merchandise. Large, back-painted glass panels on the walls draw additional attention to the different departments, with colours that are related to the products.

Of course, the colour scheme plays an important part at Edeka Ladage. Subdued, quiet shades dominate, to begin with the anthracite coloured ceiling, enhanced by brighter accents. The shelving and flooring have also been kept rather dark. Stefan Ladage explains: "There are thousands of gaudy packages in the displays whose colours do not necessarily go together. I think the expression is "product shimmer". With our colour scheme we create an environment that soothes the eye and shows the products to their best

advantage." The shop's furnishings were given quiet colours and all the wooden surfaces on the shelving and the checkouts are in "Milano Oak", a shade of grey. "We use wood surfaces where appropriate and stainless steel where it supports the function. Such additional accessories clearly enhance the overall look of the shop", Stefan Ladage says.

With every step he takes in the shop the customer should feel that goods are handled with care. The combination of cooperative wholesale and independent retail business has been realised here in an ideal fashion: Edeka represents continuity and Ladage perfectly implements the slogan "We love groceries". Meanwhile, the "ladage" private label with the green leaf over the second "a" has become a brand in its own right. Stefan Ladage himself has created the lettering and the green leaf symbolises growth and freshness.

In the conversion the refrigerated delicatessen and dairy cabinets have been extended from 27 to 46 linear metres. There are service counters in the meat department (with open preparation), as well as the fish and cheese sections. Adjacent are sections where meat products and cheeses are freshly packed. There fresh products are constantly sliced, packaged and refilled. In the fruit and vegetable department there is a "shredding kitchen" for fresh convenience articles where everything is prepared in

front of the customers' eyes.

Ladage operates also the same openness as far as its tenant, the Schäfers bakery situated in the entrance area, is concerned. The rolls are freshly baked in the shop's baker's oven and the dishes are prepared in full view. On the 70 sqm that have been set aside for the baker's shop a small bistro with 32 seats has been installed. The bakery is the only tenant in the building. The postal agency and the tobacco kiosk behind the checkout zone are operated by Ladage themselves. The checkout zone itself consists of four tills. The one in the stationery kiosk also serves as a service counter for the supermarket and is accessible to all customers. Cashless payments can be made using electronic cash solutions. "Once the costs for the continuously increasing defaults on the direct debit payments reached those of the EC-Cash transactions, we switched over," Stefan Ladage concludes.

For the Ladage supermarket this has been the fourth conversion in its existence at the same location. The customers are enthusiastic about the new shop. "Who expects to find such a terrific market here in the countryside", they say. Even in the big city one can hardly expect more.

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