

Co-construction in the “vanilla world”: the brand KiKANiNCHEN

A conversation with Isabel Wiemer*

KiKANiNCHEN is the multimedia preschool offering of ARD’s and ZDF’s children’s channel KI.KA. What exactly is behind this and why was KiKANiNCHEN developed as a brand?

In our programme we felt the need to provide orientation and security for television beginners and their parents or adult tutors. As a result, short films with the eponymous television character Kikaninchen were produced as a new programme brand. In addition, the logical programming of a 2.5-hour segment in the morning for 3- to 6-year-olds came about, which, under the family brand KiKANiNCHEN, combines all the preschool programmes of the ARD, ZDF, and KI.KA German television channels. A web portal including information for parents supplements the offering.

What is the brand philosophy of KiKANiNCHEN?

Preschool children watch on average 73 minutes of television a day – far more than is recommended by educators. Given this knowledge and in keeping with our public service broadcasting mandate, it is our concern to provide an educationally valuable and suitable programme for this target group. This is also the commitment that we have made to parents and children. Wherever Kikaninchen airs, 3- to 6-year-olds can watch television without any reservations for the recommended period of time.

What distinguishes KiKANiNCHEN from other competitors in the marketplace?

Only with us children can meet all of their TV heroes and heroines together in one place. Through this family brand we have developed the concept of “designed transitions”. Instead of trailers there are short spots before the programmes in which Kikaninchen meets, for example, the respective protagonist of the follow-up programme. But we also introduce an online module which has all TV friends riding a Ferris wheel together.

Our reception studies show that children really enjoy this.

How is the brand philosophy implemented into the programme?

The basis of the entire brand KiKANiNCHEN is the educational concept of co-construction, which is placed like a frame around all the processes. We assume that the target group of 3- to 6-year-olds consists of active and motivated children who have a strong interest in themselves and their surroundings. The protagonists of the programme, but also we as KI.KA, act

as educational partners who promote the construction of meanings and an understanding of the world. We base the entire programme concept on this, particularly the screenplay work. We include the desirable areas of competence for children, for example the promotion of language. In this case the authors would, for example, create a series on the topic of “rhymes”. In doing so, they would skillfully integrate the topic into a story, since stories are especially well suited for promoting learning processes because of their emotional links.

What role do the characters Kikaninchen and Christian play?

A rabbit as a fluffy, likeable pet touches off associations of well-being. In addition, it elegantly carries the name of our TV station. During the aesthetic design of the character Kikaninchen, we regularly interviewed

3- to 6-year-olds and have now achieved a high level of acceptance. In keeping with the educational concept, Christian is Kikaninchen’s adult friend, who can, through social interaction, promote the latter’s development. As a role model, Kikaninchen is drawn up to be like a 5-year-old child. Christian adjusts to this stage of development and actively promotes skills, ensures rewards and experiences of success, activates, and encourages – always in the sense of a spontaneous invitation. Reception studies have shown that the character

had been conceived as too “school-masterly” in the beginning. Of course Kikaninchen and Christian are both allowed to display their particular emotional competences and to engage in controversy with one another.

Are there topics that are not dealt with publicly or are formulated in other ways and, if so, why?

In terms of our brand core, Christian and Kikaninchen have been drawn up to be best friends. Outwardly, however, we would tend to describe Christian only as the adult friend of Kikaninchen. We consider this to be significantly more meaningful and comprehensible.

In terms of content, we deal with all the topics that affect the lifeworld of 3- to 6-year-olds and that enter their everyday life and particular stages of development. In doing so, there are initially no taboos with the exception of the depiction of violence. We never offer only one way for how things might occur. Since every child is different, we would not reach our target group otherwise.

How is the brand concept reflected in the aesthetic aspect?

Our programme design, the so-called “vanilla world”, is based on torn paper, decent pencil strokes, and patterned fabrics. This very haptic level allows a lot of room for imagination. The paper with the tear-off edges

makes it possible to play with different levels and to go into depth – like on a theatre stage. The design, which is supplemented by the 3 basic colours of the family brand, has the message: this is so simple that any child can do it at home with the same methods. Off-air, such simple elements are wonderfully employed. During the KI.KA summer tour 2010, for example, children played enthusiastically with scraps of paper.

We try to transfer this haptic aesthetics to the licence products too, that is, by avoiding plastic packaging as much as possible and instead using cardboard, paper, or fabrics, which correspond considerably better with the brand.

How are licences conferred in the case of KiKANiNCHEN?

Licence partners have to be endowed with a good deal of understanding of the brand core of KiKANiNCHEN. Curious, eager to learn, playful, imaginative – we try to project these attributes on the product level. Articles should provide not simply a conventional form, but an added-value which the purchasers of the products may discover for themselves. Often, it is not enough to simply transfer proven recipes to the licence area of KiKANiNCHEN. The brand always requires a new twist, one which is justified in terms of content, for example telling stories on all levels. Of course good quality of the products is essential and it also has to meet the parents’ expectations.

How are employees trained in terms of the brand?

Before the beginning of the programme, on the editorial level we once again internalised the brand for ourselves, working with a noted expert in the field. Later, it was a matter of checking from an interdisciplinary standpoint to see whether the initial intention had also been achieved, which is for us, in any case, an essential and constantly ongoing work process.

Especially when we make KiKANiNCHEN accessible to licensees, the brand should neither be altered nor forged. This led to the development of a style guide in relation to the linkage between the family and programme brand and how it is handled. The brand code book contains the most important fundamentals of our brand usage rules for the symbols, the character, the aesthetics, and the language. We would call this: “KiKANiNCHEN – This is how it’s done and this is how not.” The terms “the blue Kikaninchen” or the “blue hare” would be, for example, no-gos, since these are not the kind of messages we want to send and we also want to distinguish Kikaninchen from the blue elephant. This guide is available to all those involved in the process so that there are no gut decisions but rather reliable criteria – which, however, does not prevent us from also acting intuitively.

What is next for the brand KiKANiNCHEN?

Among other things, we presented KiKANiNCHEN for the first time as an educational theme at the Didacta 2011 education fair. Apart from that, we would be happy if KiKANiNCHEN were to establish itself as a reliable brand among the various preschool offerings and as material suitable for media educational projects in day care centres. It would be tremendous if the character were to become as well known as the Mouse or Ernie and Bert, for example – and if Kikaninchen could, at some time, become a classic of preschool television, without gathering dust.

* Shortened version of a conversation between Isabel Wiemer, Managing Editor for Preschool at KI.KA, the children’s channel of ARD and ZDF, and Genia Baranowski (IZI).

