

Bolia Designs for All Your Senses: CEO Q+A

How the Danish company brings new Scandinavian design to customers at home and work

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To say that Lars Lyse Hansen, CEO of Bolia.com International, is interesting would be an understatement. The experimental, mountain-climbing, music-making, digital-first leader is in his second decade with the award-winning Danish design company. Bolia.com is known for its Scandinavian design traditions, sustainable materials and top-notch craftsmanship. It's also recognized for its progressive digital first mindset and its mission to bring a holistic sensory experience to its customers (think feel, sound, smell, sight, even taste).

Bolia.com recently expanded its relationship with Steelcase to offer a curated collection of its Scandinavian designs for the workplace in the Americas and Europe. Lyse Hansen spoke to 360 from Denmark where he lives with his wife and three children to share how Bolia.com creates a unique experience for its customers.

360: Your Scandinavian design roots bring to mind a warm, luxurious, comfortable aesthetic. How do you describe your design ethos?

Lars Lyse Hansen: Our background is rooted in the proud tradition of more than a century of craftsmanship in Denmark. We're combining beauty, design, sustainability, functionality and craft in everything we do. In short, we say it's about quality and quality of life. So, it's the quality of the product that we're very concerned about and then, of course, there has to be a pleasure to use and observe it.

It's also important to us that we bring a fresh eye to Scandinavian design because sitting in Scandinavia, you can get snow-blind surrounded by Nordic design. We invite designers from all around the world to help us. It's very interesting for us to see what, for example, a Japanese design duo adds to Scandinavian design.



360: What changes have you seen in the decade that you've been leading Bolia?

LLH: Bolia was founded in 2000 and I joined in 2005. At that time, Bolia had 10 people at the head office and a very entrepreneurial culture. One thing that has not changed is our web-based concept. Our point of sale system is online. So, whether we're selling through a physical store or online or through our dealers, we always do it through the same web-based platform. Also, our furniture is made to order – so we have extreme flexibility.

While the platform has remained the same, everything around it has changed. In 2005 we decided to become a design company. Before that, we were more of a tech company. We started collaborating with designers. We started developing our stores and our workshops and focused on expansion. Now, we have 58 Bolia design stores and web shops in 32 European countries, and more than 500 dealers in more than 50 countries around the world. Even though we've grown, we still feel like a small company culture and we make fast decisions. In our culture, nothing remains stable, everything is moving forward – our concept, our business and ourselves as individuals. That's one of our strengths.



360: Last October, you went to Japan to summit Mount Fuji with your son. What draws you to such a demanding sport?

LLH: I started mountaineering in 2009 during the financial crisis. I needed to clear my mind. I climbed Kilimanjaro back then. When I returned, my wife said I came back a better person. I was hooked – on adventure, new cultures, just seeing the world. Now, I go once a year. It's an experiment to see what I am actually capable of. And, the suffering you experience when you're mountaineering helps you appreciate the little things in life – it's like getting a restart.



360: Bolia is unique in the way it considers a holistic sensory experience for customers. You have custom scents, curated music and organic coffee and chocolates in your stores to complement your beautifully designed furniture. Why is considering all the senses so important?

LLH: We have five senses and if you really want to make sure that customers perceive the brand as you want, you have to ask the really weird questions; “How does my brand sound? How does it taste? What does it smell like? How does it feel?” So, we did that exercise and we came up with a certain sound, feel and fragrance. Today, we’re working with the five senses in basically everything we do. Our physical stores slow down the retail experience and give people a chance to relax and look around. We share our music in places like Soundcloud and Spotify. It’s all about making our brand experience as trustworthy and whole as possible for everybody who meets it.

360: Your collaboration with Steelcase started in Europe and has recently expanded to the Americas. Why does the relationship work so well?

LLH: We both have a strong focus on quality and people. The workplace has changed from a more formal, traditional office into an informal, multi-functional place. I think with designs from Steelcase and Bolia we can make the workplace more social, relaxing, enjoyable and beautiful. In addition to what we have in common, we also have these differences that complement each other. Steelcase deeply understands workers and the workplace, and we have a rich background in residential design and creating a homey, comfortable feeling. Together, the two are dynamite.



360: You work with a talented mix of designers—from the up and coming to the world-renowned. How do you help support young designers?

LLH: Since 2007, we've invited young designers from around the world to enter the Bolia Design Awards. The winning design is put into production. The contest celebrates young designers and helps them get a foot in the door to the business. And, of course, we also get the ability to discover new talent. And they will then become established designers in our design team and we have a really nice journey together.

360: Bolia was founded in 2000 with an online presence. The iPhone wasn't released until 2007. There's been tremendous change since then and you've managed to stay on top of it. How?

LLH: I always tell people we are a half design, half tech company. Energy for technology and design comes from the same place—creativity. That creativity can either go into design and product development or tech development. We're always looking at how can we make things smarter with technology? It comes from a culture of always feeling like we're never finished. We love today's collection, but the next one will be better. Our IT platform is the best we've ever built, but it's just the beginning.

360: What's inspiring your team right now?

LLH: The next big thing we've been investigating is what we call Mother Nature. We are trying to present nature in a new way. And, I can promise you, it's the best we have ever done. It's anchored by an authentic story about the materials we have selected and how we work with those materials to bring nature to life through design. It's simple and beautiful.



360: How does your physical environment impact your business?

LLH: All our central functions are located here in our Denmark office. It's important for me our headquarters is located on top of a Bolia concept store. Everyone working here remembers every day that reality is not what you see at the office, it's what you see on the ground floor. Just below us, we have customers, our designs and sales people giving us feedback. The concept store is a place to test weird stuff. We're in contact with what we sell every day. It's immediate feedback. So, we really love that.

And, of course, we're in a lifestyle business. We need to inspire, so every time there's a new collection, we rebuild all 58 stores and our head office. That's twice a year, a huge investment. Our surroundings have to be inspirational, vibrant and current just like our stores. So, many of the elements we have here at our head office, all the way down to the coffee we serve and the music we play is exactly the same as we have in our stores. We've built in some surprises as well. In the middle of our staff room, we have a one-and-a-half meter large disco ball. So, we can turn our staff room into a nightclub with the switch of a light.

Ready to have some fun? You can learn more about the [exclusive curated collection of Bolia](#) designs including sofas, [dining chairs](#) and tables available through its collaboration with Steelcase.



Lars Lyse Hansen serves as CEO at Bolia International A/S. With a history that involves a long and inspiring career in international retail and E-tail, Lars has worked across Europe, the Middle East and Asia before picking up the mantle at Bolia and leading the way for their successful results, global expansion and creative journey. Besides a strong passion for Nordic design, creativity and happy customers, Lars is a music producer, mountaineer and self-proclaimed familianaire, enjoying life together with his wife, photographer Christina Greve, their three children and two dogs.