

Ceo Sigrid van Aken: 'We are aiming for the second 10 billion'.



Sigrid van Aken: 'We must always go on, we need to keep moving, new things need to happen.' IMAGE FRANK RUITER

Big interests, big money, a lot of employees: what drives top executives? Success for them, but also setbacks in times of crisis. Ceo of Novamedia (Postcode Lottery) Sigrid van Aken (50) is not afraid of criticism. Take the helm yourself, I guess'.

Founder Boudewijn Poelmann was 'mister Postcode Lottery'. Did you doubt whether you should follow in his footsteps?

"No. Fortunately, I have been working here for twenty years and I know the organisation inside out. A week after my appointment, the lockdown in the Netherlands was announced. At that time it was about very different things than the change of the ceo. All of a sudden there were 1500 people at home. A new era, with different challenges. For a ceo from outside the organization that would have been an impossible task.

Have you always wanted to take the chair of CEO?

"No, I've never been occupied with that. I wanted to work in an organisation that is committed to others and to the world. I find that here."

If you had passed for this place, would you have stayed too?

Laughing: "Then I would have left immediately. No... I've never thought about it like that before. I just really like it here."

To put it another way: if you had worked in another company, would you have become a ceo too?

"Yes, I think so. I am very curious, result oriented and I want to get things done. I am happy to take the lead.

Sigrid van Aken is CEO of Novamedia, the owner of lottery concepts for charities including the Dutch Postcode Lottery. She took over from the flamboyant entrepreneur and founder Boudewijn Poelmann in February. Her surroundings sketch Van Aken as diplomatic and balanced. She is a ceo with a flawless track record, her gaze invariably focused on the positive. According to her, this is only possible because she has such a solid home base. With her husband, son (15) and daughter (13) she lives in Amsterdam Old-West. At home she sometimes stumbles over the mess, but in the new premises of the Postcode Lottery on Beethovenstraat she is in tight control.

In the Netherlands, your organisation is mainly known as the Postcode Lottery.

"Novamedia is the organisation behind the Postcode Lottery, which also includes the Friends Lottery and the BankGiro Lottery. In addition, we are now a large international organisation; we have lotteries in Sweden, Germany, Norway and Great Britain. There is also interest from Canada and we are looking at possibilities in France.

"Over the past thirty years, we have been able to give 10 billion euros away to charities. If we can realise this now, then countries such as Germany and Great Britain are a huge growth market for us.

How is the Postcode Lottery affected by the corona crisis?

"Fortunately, we have a virtual product and we work with a subscription model which does not hit us so hard. But we support many sectors that have been hit hard, such as the cultural sector. We decided at the beginning of the crisis that we were going to help these

institutions easily. This resulted, for example, in the Kickstart Culture Fund. There, cultural institutions could apply for adaptations to their building or performance, so that they could also remain open in the 1.5-metre covid-society. Without too much bureaucracy, we were able to process these applications. In this way, the BankGiro Lottery, together with a number of other funds, distributed 16 million euros. At the beginning of 2021 we will continue, unfortunately the need is still there.

Have you received a phone call from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to thank you?

"They are happy that we can act so quickly with private money. The Minister has now asked us to distribute EUR 10 million from the public sector as well".

There are not many companies that can release EUR 16 million just like that.

"We have established charities, but we always leave some room for specific projects. This year most of that has gone to emergency aid for the cultural sector".

Does it make a difference that you have no shareholders?

"It is true that we have a unique governance structure, which distinguishes us from all other companies. Our shares are in the hands of foundations, so we cannot be taken over by a commercial party. The aim of this structure is that the decision-makers all have the same objective: to create social value.

"This allows us to do business sustainably and does not force us into short-term profits or successes to please shareholders."

Your predecessor was more exuberant. The type who is not afraid to take risks. How do you retain this culture of transgressive thinking?

"I am balanced, but that transverse thinking and the search for possibilities is also in my dna. I have worked with the founders for a very long time. I have learned how important it is to feel this structural dissatisfaction. We always have to keep moving, new things have to happen. We are basically a creative organisation and I try to challenge my colleagues to keep thinking outside the box".

Could you give me an example?

"We said to our charities; think of something unique where we could help you. Then Natuurmonumenten came up with the idea of the Markerwadden, new nature islands in the Markermeer. We put more than EUR 20 million into this. And with success: it has become an incredibly rich nature reserve. This is an example of a project that can only be achieved by daring things that no one else dares. As a result of our private investment, the government and the provincial authorities ultimately also stepped in. That is what I call thinking big and bothersome.

Your predecessor placed the Scheltema and ECI bookstores in Novamedia. Will this love of literature and books continue to exist under your leadership?

"I endorse that interest. In 2015, Scheltema was on the brink of collapse. We thought it was such a shame that we decided to buy the company and keep it. Think of it as a gift for the people of Amsterdam. There are also many other projects that we support with the lotteries and that make our city a bit more beautiful, such as the Anne Frank House, Foam, Jewish

Historical Museum, Van Gogh, the Hermitage, the Concertgebouw. I don't think many inhabitants of Amsterdam realise how much we contribute to the city".

Did you grow up in Amsterdam?

"I was born in De Pijp, but soon we moved to the south of the country. Later we moved back to the Randstad. I did my final exams in The Hague. After secondary school I went to France for a year as an au pair. I think that was also the reason that I started to study French. After graduating, I started as an IT consultant, but after a few years I wanted more social orientation in my work. I saw a vacancy 'manager charities Postcode Lottery'. Then I thought: I'm going to work there for a while, then I know what that world looks like and I can then join a charity. But I stayed. This is where everything comes together.

What is your strongest characteristic?

"I am very focused on the relationship. But also on the result. One cannot do without the other."

And what is it you are not so good at?

"My husband would say that I'm pushy and often want to push my way through. My children ridicule me often enough, that's a good way to keep putting yourself in perspective. Fortunately, I have a very safe and stable basis. From there I can operate well. When I come home after a long day and I stumble about all the junk and clothes lying on the floor and then I go crazy, then mild mockery is my part. I'm not listened to as well at home as I am here at the office.

Can you laugh at that yourself?

Laughing: "Well... not right away."

You let your husband have it?

"No, of course not. He also has a busy life. He has his own business: he's a wine importer."

Does your husband ever complain that you work too much?

"He never complains. He is the best example of someone who meets everything without expectations. That's why he's always happy with what's coming his way."

What kind of family do you come from?

"A safe family. I have two older brothers. My parents were strict by today's standards, we had a no-nonsense upbringing. If there were problems, you wouldn't whine about it. In fact, you just went on and on. We often moved for my father's work, he was an engineer. I went to school in Bergen op Zoom, Arnhem and The Hague.

What did those moves do to you?

"I didn't find it annoying. I adapt easily. Actually, I see the positive aspects, I made a lot of friends. I value friendship greatly, that's the basis in life. It starts and ends with making contact with each other".

How do you find the time to maintain those friendships?

"That's working fine. I don't see it as a task. I don't see my girlfriends very often because of the current situation, but in a good friendship it doesn't matter. That remains good."

Back to work, did you ever make a mistake there?

"That's not how I look at my work. Work is a continuous learning process in which you keep discovering new things. I am optimistic and focused on the result. I once worked with an organisation I thought at one point: this isn't going to work. Then you're pulling a dead horse. I can't bring myself to do that. Cooperation must always benefit both parties. If you are mainly defending your own interests, you know that it is time to stop."

What goals do you still have?

"To extend the lotteries to other countries. And, of course, to keep the existing lotteries in the five countries in which we are already operating successful and to allow them to grow further. We are aiming for the second 10 billion."

You mainly see growth?

"Yes, but there are also challenges. In six months' time, for example, online gambling will be legalised in the Netherlands. We will then face a new form of competition. Behind these online gambling companies are often large commercial companies. As fundraising lotteries, we have a completely different product, but we all operate in the same gambling market. We will have to fight to maintain our revenues for charity."

Sigrid van Aken

Born Amsterdam, 1 March 1970

Education in science, French language and literature Gymnasium

Function(s)

- Ceo Novamedia

- Supervisory Board City Transport

Turnover EUR 2 billion, profit for charities EUR 800 million

Number of employees 1480 (including Scheltema and the publishers)