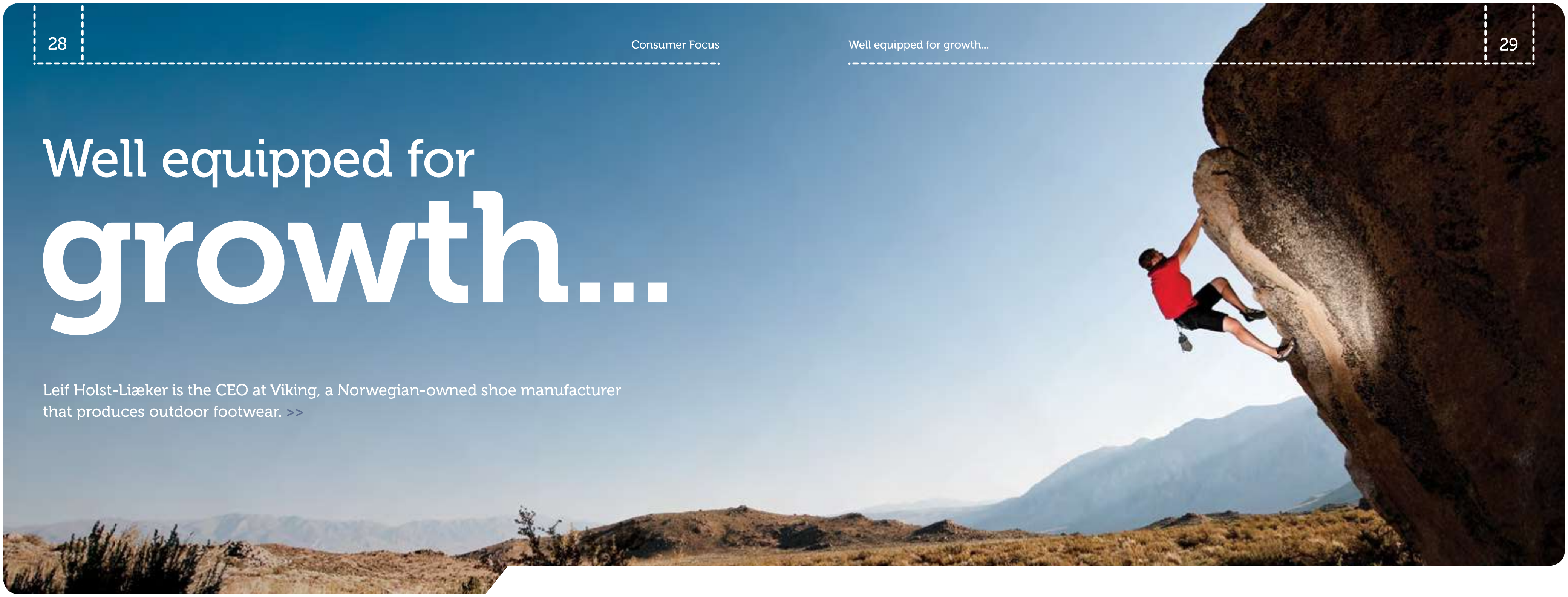

Well equipped for growth...

Leif Holst-Liæker is the CEO at Viking, a Norwegian-owned shoe manufacturer that produces outdoor footwear. >>

What's the agenda for Viking today?

Our long term goal is for Viking to be recognised as the leading Nordic supplier of outdoor footwear in the European market. In recent years, Viking has taken major steps towards this goal but there are still certain things that need to be in place before we can say we have achieved our objective. What is highest on our agenda now is growth – both with our existing customers and also in new markets outside of the Nordic region. Building production capacity in Asia and reducing manufacturing costs has become a key factor in our overall plans to expand. We have a clear strategy which focuses on building a small number of long-term partnerships in Asia; this is actually something that is important for any clothing or equipment supplier today.

It must be difficult to be a Norwegian company in a market where your main competitors are all large international businesses?

Being a small Norwegian company entrenched in the Nordic market certainly has its drawbacks, but I always like to focus on the benefits. We experience very strong domestic sales and a high demand for the quality and functionality of our products; which are predominantly used in very tough climates. This means that we have a solid base from which to grow our brand and raise awareness of the credibility of our products around the world. We target niche areas where we feel we can be leaders through our experience and unique expertise. Like all other Norwegian and Nordic suppliers of 'outdoor' products we are in a great position to succeed internationally, because coming from this region means we intimately know how best to deal with tough climates and difficult outdoor terrain.

Many industries, like yours, are constantly changing and evolving. What do you stay focused on?

Firstly we try, as mentioned before, to focus on a few niche areas where we can both monitor and drive our development. Within these niche areas, we have the best expertise in our organisation. In addition, we have a policy to only work with partners who are world leaders in their field. This applies to everything from the suppliers of product technologies and components, to the end-users. By working with and challenging these partners, we ensure that we always have access to the best expertise.

Ten percent of Viking's shoes are now sold outside of the Nordic region: how do you anticipate this trend developing in the future?

We expect our sales outside of the Nordic region to continue to grow over the next few years. It does not mean, however, that we won't grow our sales in the Nordic countries as well. It's only natural though to recognise the greatest potential for growth to exist outside of the Nordics. We have high expectations for the German market, for example, where we established an office in 2008. We have experienced very positive developments in Germany so far: sales growth has actually doubled year-on-year. Russia is another country where our growth is strong. We don't currently have any investments outside of Europe but North America and Asia may be appropriate target markets for Viking in the future.

What are the factors that will continue to be central to Viking's success as a company, helping the business to achieve its goals?

Without the right products we won't succeed in the long term. So making innovative and functional products with the appropriate quality and design will always be a fundamental success factor. Beyond this, it is critical how well we handle the transition from being purely a shoe supplier, to being a sports supplier and also how we make the transition from being a Nordic distributor to becoming a European supplier. It's certainly going to make different demands on our organisation, in terms of innovation, professionalism and teamwork. The most important thing we can do is to build an organisation with the necessary competences, values and culture to serve as an international brand supplier.

Where will Viking be in 2015?

I would hope Viking will have almost doubled its sales from 2010 and is well on track towards its long term ambition of becoming the European leader in its niche areas. We will probably have significantly higher sales growth outside the Nordic countries and outside of Europe too; while in the Nordic market Viking will be regarded as a supplier you cannot ignore for both shoes and sports stores.

Leif Holst-Liæker, CEO at Viking

In 2010 you were named as one of Norway's emerging young leaders, what have you done to get where you are today and what advice would you give to other young leaders?

It's difficult to say exactly what I've done, but in the first instance it was important for me to do well in school. This provided me with a lot of opportunities early in my career, in particular because it enabled me to have a broad choice of the job market when I first started searching for my first job. After all, education and your personality are the most relevant data-points employers have to assess your suitability for a role when you don't have any prior professional experience or references.

The first job that you take on after your studies is also very important, perhaps more so than your school grades. It gives you the foundation for your future career development and career opportunities. For me, I am completely sure that I would not be where I am today if I hadn't spent four years with McKinsey & Company. And I wouldn't have had the opportunity to work there without first putting a lot of effort into doing well at school. I have always tried to be open with my employers about what my personal goals and ambitions are. I think it's important to let them know you have the courage and desire to take on new challenges. Many people have both the desire and the capability to take on new and greater challenges but don't dare tell their employers and this limits the opportunities that they ultimately get.

> "We expect our sales outside of the Nordic region to continue to grow over the next few years. It does not mean, however, that we won't grow our sales in the Nordic countries as well."

In terms of giving advice to young leaders, perhaps the main thing I can say is never accept the fact that because you're young you don't have the basic ability or capacity to lead. I don't believe that there is a correlation between age, experience and the ability to be a good manager. Rather, personal characteristics combined with the right situation forms the basis of whether one is a good or a bad leader. Therefore, you should always be conscious of what your strengths are and make sure that you have the skills and potential experience represented in your staff, that you yourself perhaps lack.

At Viking, I have a management team with a wealth of experience in our industry and a chairman with extensive management experience that I use as a mentor, when I require one. I believe in many ways that this is the best possible situation for a young leader to be in.

JACOB RØNNE, MANAGING CONSULTANT
NIGEL WRIGHT RECRUITMENT

Nigel Wright News >>

Nigel Wright in Norwegian trade press

In the latest edition of Dagligvarehandelen, Norway's weekly newspaper for the retail industry, Nigel Wright's Jacob Rønne Country Manager for Norway, based in Oslo, discusses future careers in the grocery industry, including the new leadership challenges facing the sector. In the article published in October, he talks about a new kind of talent that is now working in grocery retailing. Not only are retailers hiring managers with analytical skills but also broader qualities too, including proven experience of developing talent as well as an intimate understanding of what its like on the shop floor, in the face of the consumer.

The article goes on to discuss the undeserved poor reputation the retail industry has for career development opportunities. Today, according to Rønne, many retailers offer attractive places for people to work with plenty of scope for development. People who work in the sector also describe it as exciting and fun and ultimately become very loyal to the brand. Rønne argues that there is definitely a need for some rebranding in the sector to make people more aware of the opportunities and working cultures that exist. Store managers, as leaders, will play a vital role here in encouraging employees to consider long term retail careers.

Reviewing our service performance

'Big data' is one of the trends dominating the strategic agenda at businesses across all sectors. According to the McKinsey report Big Data: The Next Frontier of Innovation, competition, and productivity: 'The use of big data will become a key basis of competition and growth for individual firms'. >>

Nigel Wright is committed to offering outstanding customer service across all of its markets and part of that is seeking regular feedback from customers so that we can continually improve our service.

Collecting valuable data helps us to refine our processes as well as develop adequate training programmes for our teams. This in turn gives us a strategic advantage in the marketplace by allowing us to review issues and then make immediate improvements across all areas of our business.

Since the publication of the last Consumer Focus Magazine, we have enjoyed continued growth, expanding our operations in Europe while assisting clients with growth in key developing consumer markets, such as China and Brazil. Even during this period of rapid expansion both clients and candidates have consistently provided Nigel Wright with excellent feedback for the services they have received.

At the end of our financial year we completed a full 12 month review of customer feedback. The table below shows the NetPromoter scores for our main markets. The overall score across all of our markets, over four quarters, was 92%. That means that 92% of customers in the last financial year would recommend our services to others. This is particularly high for any growing business and we believe it positions us ahead of our competitors.

In any aspect of performance measurement the objective is to analyse results and look for ways to improve scores. This is what we have endeavoured to do and the outcome has been very positive. The latest results of 2012, which we published internally in August, show that the NetPromoter score for the whole business has risen to 94%. We aim to improve this score again when results are analysed later this year.

NetPromoter >>