

Stefan Kerkhofs: A Pioneer in Experiential Entertainment and the Sky-High Success of Dinner in the Sky

Introduction

Stefan Kerkhofs is a Belgian entrepreneur renowned for his innovative contributions to the entertainment and dining industries. While his career encompasses diverse ventures, he is most notably recognized as the co-creator of Dinner in the Sky, a globally acclaimed dining concept that elevates culinary experiences to new heights, literally. This research paper delves into Kerkhofs' background, his entrepreneurial journey, and the remarkable success of Dinner in the Sky, placing it within the context of the burgeoning experiential dining market.

Stefan Kerkhofs: From Cranes to Culinary Heights

Early Life and Background

- **Family Heritage in Construction:** Stefan Kerkhofs' early life was deeply influenced by his family's construction company. Growing up surrounded by cranes ignited a childhood fascination that would later shape his innovative career path.
- **Technical Mechanics Foundation:** Working within the family business provided Kerkhofs with a strong foundation in technical mechanics. This practical experience proved crucial in his subsequent ventures, particularly in the development of Dinner in the Sky.

- **Dreamer and Idea Generator:** Kerkhofs describes himself as a "dreamer and idea generator," a self-perception validated by his track record of conceiving and launching groundbreaking entertainment concepts.

Educational Background

- **Bachelor's Degree in Computer and Information Sciences:** Kerkhofs holds a Bachelor's degree in Computer and Information Sciences, General, obtained from Sint Lodewijk Instituut te Antwerpen between 1985 and 1986.
- **Attendance at Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg:** He also attended Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg from 1989 to 1993, indicating a continued pursuit of higher education in the technical field.
- **Potential Discrepancies:** While the Bachelor's degree information is considered more specific and recent, there are slight discrepancies in the reported educational details across different sources, suggesting potential variations in available records.

Benji Fun: Introducing Bungee Jumping to Europe

- **Pioneering Bungee Jumping in Europe:** In 1990, Stefan Kerkhofs established Benji Fun, a company that played a pivotal role in introducing the adrenaline-pumping sport of bungee jumping to the European continent.
- **Early Venture into Experiential Entertainment:** Benji Fun marked Kerkhofs' initial foray into the experiential entertainment industry, showcasing his ability to identify and capitalize on emerging trends in leisure and adventure activities.

The Fungroup: Expanding into Innovative Events

- **Foundation and Evolution:** Building upon the success of Benji Fun, Kerkhofs founded The Fungroup, expanding his entrepreneurial focus to creating a wider array of innovative and high-profile events.
- **Diverse Service Portfolio:** The Fungroup specializes in designing and executing unique experiences for a broad clientele, including corporate gatherings, private parties, children's events, educational institutions, religious organizations, community events, and weddings.

- **Global Reach:** The Fungroup has established a significant global presence, providing travel and education experiences in 70 countries through 7 bases located around the world.
- **Financial Overview (Belgian Fungroup):**
 - Founded: February 2, 2009 (Belgium)
 - Primary Activity: Renting and leasing recreational and sports goods
 - Gross Margin (Most Recent Financial Statement): €570,472.75
 - Employees: 6.4 Full-Time Equivalents

Distinguishing The Fungroup (Belgium) from Fun Group Inc. (Japan)

Feature	The Fungroup (Belgium)	Fun Group Inc. (Japan)
Founding Date	February 2, 2009	January 30, 2014
Location	Belgium	Tokyo, Japan
Primary Activity	Renting recreational/sports goods, events	Travel startup, tours, experiences
CEO/ Representative	Not specified in sources	Kenji Miki (Managing Director)
Financial Data	Gross Margin (€) reported	Capital (¥) reported

- **Potential Relationship Uncertainty:** While both entities share similar names and operate within the travel and leisure sector, the research does not definitively confirm a direct relationship between the Belgian Fungroup and the Japanese Fun Group Inc., suggesting they may be separate entities.

Dinner in the Sky: A Culinary Experience Elevated

Concept and Co-Creation

- **Unique Aerial Dining Experience:** Dinner in the Sky is a groundbreaking dining concept that utilizes a crane to hoist diners, chefs, and a specially designed table approximately 150 feet (50 meters) into the air.
- **Co-Creation with David Ghysels:** Stefan Kerkhofs co-created Dinner in the Sky in 2006 with marketing expert David Ghysels. Ghysels, owner of the marketing company Hakuna Matata, conceived the idea initially to celebrate his daughter's birthday in an extraordinary manner.
- **Synergy of Expertise:** The collaboration between Kerkhofs' technical expertise with cranes and Ghysels' marketing vision and innovative concept proved to be a powerful combination, resulting in the global phenomenon of Dinner in the Sky.

Global Operations and Reach

- **Worldwide Phenomenon:** Dinner in the Sky has become a global sensation, operating in over 80 countries across continents.
- **Franchise Model:** The concept's widespread reach is facilitated by a franchise model, allowing entrepreneurs worldwide to implement Dinner in the Sky in their respective regions.
- **Versatile Locations:** Dinner in the Sky's adaptability allows it to be set up in diverse locations, from urban centers and iconic landmarks to natural landscapes and even over water bodies.
- **Target Markets:** Dinner in the Sky primarily targets three key market segments:
 - **Corporate Clients:** Catering to corporate events and functions.
 - **Tourists:** Attracting tourists seeking unique and memorable experiences.
 - **Local Residents:** Offering extraordinary dining experiences for local populations.

Business Details and Economics

- **Corporate Clientele Focus:** Dinner in the Sky primarily caters to corporate clients, who are willing to invest in unique and high-impact events.

- **Pricing Model (2010):** In 2010, the average cost for a Dinner in the Sky event was approximately \$38,000 for 22 guests, highlighting its premium and exclusive nature.
- **Revenue Estimates:**
 - ZoomInfo: Less than \$5 million annually (multiple entries)
 - Datanyze: \$2.3 million annually
 - Prezi Presentation: \$5 million annually
 - **Note:** Revenue figures are estimates and may not be current or fully consistent across sources.
- **High-End Pricing:** In locations like Las Vegas, Dinner in the Sky has been priced around \$290 per person, positioning it firmly within the luxury dining segment.

Recognition and Features

- **Forbes Recognition:** Forbes magazine has recognized Dinner in the Sky as one of the world's ten most unusual restaurants, solidifying its reputation for innovation and uniqueness.
- **Featured in Major Cities:** Dinner in the Sky has been featured in numerous major cities globally, including Paris, London, Brussels, and Las Vegas, further enhancing its international profile.

Safety and Operations

- **Safety as a Priority:** Safety is paramount in Dinner in the Sky operations, with redundant safety attachments for tables and seats, and strict operational procedures overseen by dedicated safety staff.
- **Franchise Support:** Franchisees receive comprehensive support, including initial training, digital marketing materials, standard operating procedures, automation apps, and the Dinner in the Sky platform itself.
- **Franchisee Responsibilities:** Franchisees are responsible for site setup, crane rental and inspection, obtaining licenses and insurance, staffing, and arranging ancillary services like catering and entertainment.

Competitive Landscape of Dinner in the Sky

Limited Direct Competition

- **Unique Concept Advantage:** Dinner in the Sky's highly specialized concept of aerial dining provides a significant advantage, resulting in limited direct competition in most markets.

Key Competitors and Alternatives

- **FlyDining:**
 - **Direct Competitor:** FlyDining is identified as a direct competitor, offering a similar sky dining experience using cranes.
 - **Global Expansion:** FlyDining operates in multiple countries and is expanding to new locations, including Puerto Rico, signifying growing competition in the market.
 - **Concept Imitation Allegations:** Dinner in the Sky's creator, David Ghysels, has accused FlyDining of concept imitation and marketing plagiarism, leading to legal disputes.
- **Sky Restaurants:**
 - **Potential Competitor:** While not explicitly detailed, "Sky Restaurants" are mentioned as offering potentially similar experiences, with planned permanent locations incorporating ground-based facilities alongside elevated dining.
- **Elevated Dining Venues:**
 - **Indirect Competition:** Traditional restaurants and lounges offering exceptional aerial views, such as rooftop venues and sky-high restaurants, represent indirect competition. Examples include:
 - Horizon Grill (Kuala Lumpur)
 - LondonHouse Rooftop (Chicago)
 - Pier 6 (Boston)
 - Ocean Prime Las Vegas
 - Skyfall Lounge (Las Vegas)
 - ALLÉ Lounge on 66 (Las Vegas)
 - Top of the World (Las Vegas)

Market Trends Favoring Experiential Dining

- **Growing Demand for Unique Experiences:** Consumer demand for unique and memorable dining experiences is on the rise, with a significant majority of diners willing to pay more for such experiences.
- **Desire for Interactive and Themed Dining:** Diners are increasingly seeking interactive and themed dining options, moving beyond traditional restaurant formats.
- **Social Media Influence:** Social media plays a crucial role in driving consumer choices, with visually appealing and shareable dining experiences gaining significant traction.
- **Technology Integration:** Emerging technologies like augmented and virtual reality are beginning to be integrated into dining experiences, enhancing engagement and novelty.

David Ghysels: The Visionary Co-Founder

- **Marketing and Communications Expertise:** David Ghysels is a marketing and communications professional and the owner of Hakuna Matata, a marketing company.
- **Origin of the Dinner in the Sky Idea:** Ghysels conceived the initial idea for Dinner in the Sky, driven by a desire to create an unforgettable birthday celebration for his daughter.
- **Partnership with Kerkhofs:** Ghysels partnered with Stefan Kerkhofs, recognizing Kerkhofs' expertise with cranes and extreme attractions as essential to realizing his aerial dining concept.
- **Active Involvement and Contact Person:** David Ghysels remains actively involved in Dinner in the Sky, serving as a key contact person for partnership inquiries and business development.

Stefan Kerkhofs' Current Role at Phoenix Contact

- **Business Development, Industry Management, and Automation + E-mobility:** Stefan Kerkhofs currently holds a significant role at Phoenix Contact, a global leader in industrial automation and electronic components.

- **Focus on E-mobility:** His position specifically focuses on Business Development, Industry Management, and Automation within the E-mobility sector, reflecting the growing importance of electric vehicle infrastructure and solutions.
- **Contact Person for E-mobility Solutions:** Kerkhofs serves as a primary contact person for inquiries related to Phoenix Contact's products and solutions in the e-mobility industry.
- **Location:** Based in Blomberg, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany, indicating his involvement in Phoenix Contact's European operations.

Bungee Jumping: A Precursor to Aerial Entertainment

- **Origins in Land Diving Rituals:** The concept of bungee jumping is rooted in ancient land diving rituals practiced on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu, where vine jumping was a traditional rite of passage.
- **Modern Bungee Jumping Pioneers:** Modern bungee jumping emerged in 1979 with jumps from the Clifton Suspension Bridge in England by members of the Oxford University Dangerous Sports Club.
- **Commercialization and Global Popularity:** Commercial bungee jumping gained momentum in the late 1980s, with pioneers like A.J. Hackett and John Kockelman establishing commercial sites and popularizing the sport globally.
- **Kerkhofs' Role in European Introduction:** Stefan Kerkhofs' Benji Fun company played a key role in introducing and popularizing bungee jumping in Europe in the early 1990s, establishing his early involvement in adrenaline-based entertainment.

Benji's Fun Factory: A Separate Entertainment Venture

- **Children's Entertainment Center in Harare, Zimbabwe:** Benji's Fun Factory is a children's entertainment center and party venue located in Harare, Zimbabwe, distinct from Stefan Kerkhofs' Benji Fun company.

- **Focus on Children and Families:** Benji's Fun Factory caters to children and families, offering a range of activities, party venue options, and preschool outings.
- **Location and Contact Information:**
 - Address: 44 Harare Drive, Greystone Park, Harare, Zimbabwe
 - Services: Kids entertainment centre, party venue, preschool outings
 - Contact: Mobile: 0773237766, 0782644445, Email: starts with "c" and ends with "@yahoo.com"
 - Operating Hours: Mon-Fri 08:00-17:00, Sat-Sun 10:00-18:00

Conclusion

Stefan Kerkhofs' entrepreneurial journey is characterized by a consistent drive for innovation and a keen understanding of evolving entertainment trends. From introducing bungee jumping to Europe with Benji Fun to creating the globally recognized Dinner in the Sky, Kerkhofs has consistently pushed boundaries and redefined experiential entertainment. Dinner in the Sky, his most prominent creation, stands as a testament to his visionary approach, successfully merging the thrill of heights with the indulgence of fine dining to create an unparalleled and highly sought-after experience. While navigating a competitive landscape and evolving market trends, Dinner in the Sky's continued global success underscores Stefan Kerkhofs' enduring impact on the experiential dining and entertainment industries. His current role at Phoenix Contact in the burgeoning e-mobility sector further demonstrates his adaptability and continued engagement with innovative and future-oriented industries.