

SPEECH JACQUELINE ZUIDWEG 19 Maart 2012

Her excellency, Minister Schultz Van Haegen,
Dear judges,
Dear all,

A huge thank you for this recognition of the activities of my company Zuidweg & Partners and my entrepreneurial skills.

I am absolutely delighted with it.

It is a great privilege to be included in this hall of fame for top businesswomen in the Netherlands who have won the Prix Veuve Cliquot.

I am especially happy because more than anything I see it as an important acknowledgement of the SME! The engine of the Netherlands Plc. But it's also a great acknowledgement of all Zuidweg employees and everyone who has helped me, enabling me to stand here today.

For 17 years now my entrepreneurial drive has been primarily being channelled into my passion for highlighting not only the fact that SMEs require robust, professional support at the start-up stage, but also that it is precisely when things are not going so well financially that these entrepreneurs should be given far more support.

For it's at that point that suddenly people turn their backs, the help evaporates and you swiftly find yourself all on your own.

This could, indeed *should*, be different!

Let's not omit to consider that at least 1 in 10 entrepreneurs in the Netherlands end up in dire straits financially. They have, on average, 120,000 euros' worth of unsecured debt which, in the absence of proper help, they will have a great deal of trouble getting rid of. Not to mention the damage for all creditors involved.

And in all honesty, together we could avoid a great many problems if we were to provide better, more timely guidance, as well as encouraging SME owners to have the courage to ask for help at an earlier stage. This way we will prevent there being a taboo around entrepreneurs ending up in financial trouble.

The lack of this help for entrepreneurs in financial trouble is the reason I started my own business in 1994. This gives Zuidweg, a private sector firm, a considerable degree of social involvement.

I was very surprised to see that there was not a single reliable, affordable, good-quality source of debt assistance in the Netherlands for entrepreneurs in dire straits financially. Whereas this was very much the case for private debtors.

I believed that this was completely unacceptable. And I wanted to do something about it.

Back then I myself just started out advising entrepreneurs who were no longer able to meet their financial obligations.

This enabled viable businesses (viable in spite of high levels of debt) to keep going by means of a process of debt restructuring, and many former entrepreneurs were advised to seek employment, as a result of which, by means of debt restructuring, their 20-year liability could be reduced to 3 years. The focus was and still is on seeing to it that they have their own income and can continue being part of our society.

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That there was considerable need for this is something that is also evident from the fact that to date my company has helped in excess of 20,000 entrepreneurs. The mission of Zuidweg & Partners consists in arranging and providing high-quality debt assistance available throughout the nation to entrepreneurs and former entrepreneurs. We are now active in many more fields than debt restructuring alone, and we also provide training for professionals and receivership under the Dutch Debt Rescheduling (Natural Persons) Act 1998.

Zuidweg & Partners has 90 employees and we offer support to entrepreneurs and former entrepreneurs nationwide from 5 regional offices in Hilversum, Drachten, Deventer, Gouda and Den Bosch and 3 intake offices in Amsterdam, Arnhem and Lelystad. What's more, we recently started holding consultation sessions at the Chamber of Commerce in Groningen. We work for some 160 local authorities that enable debt assistance for the SME. More than 60% of the entrepreneurs we help manage to get started again.

Amsterdam City Council was the first local authority to see that this was a matter of losing a fly to catch a trout. Amsterdam City Council was the first to support the SME in this regard, for which I am still very much indebted to them.

Another thing we are seeing at present is that an increasing number of employers are being approached by employees who are experiencing problems managing their finances. It is for that reason that we are in the process of becoming active in the field of debt assistance for employees. In such cases, the employer is our client.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year I will be pulling out all the stops to keep highlighting a number of things:

- First and foremost, that even more good-quality, affordable debt assistance has to be made available for entrepreneurs and former entrepreneurs, particularly from SMEs.
- Secondly, that together we really have to do away with the taboo surrounding the financial problems with which entrepreneurs may find themselves faced as soon as possible. There is no shame whatsoever in being in dire straits financially. This could be down to all manner of reasons, and does not necessarily mean that you are a poor entrepreneur.
 - In light of this, then, more than anything else the SME owner himself or herself should sound the alarm and ask for help at an earlier stage. This has the capacity to prevent bigger problems further down the line.
 - But at the same time, I call upon the professionals - such as accountants - surrounding the SME owner with financial issues not to write off an entrepreneur experiencing financial troubles straight away and to continue supporting him or her to prevent the situation from deteriorating.
- And what's more, I will be doing my utmost to see to it that we, as SME owners ourselves, start sharing even more knowledge and experience between us. In practice, scores of entrepreneurs who have themselves experienced financial problems have an unbelievable amount of knowledge and experience. If we don't combine this knowledge then it's a missed opportunity for everyone.

In order to grab the bull by the horns, because that's the kind of thing I like to do, I have already launched a TV programme together with Martijn Meima and Duurzaam24.tv in collaboration with Ondernemersplaza, a meeting place for entrepreneurs in Amersfoort, so as to emphasize this force. It is a programme for and by entrepreneurs, from self-employed to Ltd., called SME in The Picture. We want to offer as sturdy a nationwide platform as possible, preferably on a national TV channel, in order to exchange knowledge, inspiration and business for SME entrepreneurs. The programme is recorded live with the public. We have just recorded the first four episodes. If you'd like to play a role in this, then we'll be happy to hear from you!

Finally I would like to mention two major sources of inspiration for me who have been an important reason for me standing here today.

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In this regard, first of all I'd like to mention my grandparents. Both my grandfathers, Marinus and Janus, were SME entrepreneurs. One was a butcher and the other a building contractor. It was both my grandmothers, though - Jo and Koos - who wore the trousers and took care of the finances together with the family. This verve and dynamism, as well as the decisive vigour and the pluckiness of both my grandmothers in particular, were my biggest incentives to want to become an entrepreneur too.

And once I actually was an entrepreneur, it was great that I'd bumped into a certain Raymond Lescrauwaet, with whom I now have two lovely daughters aged 10 and 6. Apart from giving me my wonderful daughters, he has coached and supported me intensively in entrepreneurship and he has been the driving force behind the physical creation of all Zuidweg offices.

He is also an entrepreneur himself, focused on creating healthy home and working environments for vitality and performance.

The upshot of this is that we are voluntarily being the subjects of an experiment that involves living in a healthy home and working environment, not just at home but in the offices too, and, ladies and gentlemen, that's something I heartily recommend.

This is an important foundation for lasting ability to perform healthily, optimally and protractedly with a big smile on your face in the top-level sport that the business world can obviously be day in, day out! And it's the smile that's the most important aspect! Doing business with pleasure every day! I'm sure you'll understand that I can't possibly lose that pleasure over the coming year!

Ladies and gentlemen, I will conclude with two sentences:

Long live the SME in times good and not so good!
Long live Prix Veuve Cliquot!

Thank you!