Contra Promotion

Starting up as a local agency in Germany’s Ruhr area in 1993, Contra Promotion has grown to become an established brand in the country’s events industry. Founder and managing director Björn Gralla leads a dedicated team. From their headquarters in Bochum, they organise around 500 concerts and shows throughout Europe every year.

In 1997, Contra Promotion began arranging tours for Göttingen rock band Guano Apes. The band played a major role in the agency’s success. After splitting up several years ago, the Apes are now doing a comeback tour – and they’re back on Contra’s books. The agency has also made a name for itself with other acts from Germany and abroad. They include HIM, Sunrise Avenue, Nightwish, H-Blockx, Kevin Costner and Oomph!. Contra Promotion works with a wide range of genres, covering everything from metal and pop to jazz and soul – and even comedy acts.
„WE’RE GROWING ORGANICALLY“.

Contra Promotion is turning 20 in 2013. How satisfied are you with the way the agency has developed?

BJÖRN GRALLA: When Contra Promotion started up the business model was designed to grow and develop our core business on a fast but steady pace. The entire team has worked hard to put us on this positive trajectory. They’ve set up a good network and have done a great job for a lot of bands. It was good to see how fast the company gained in size, revenues and staff.

You organise around 500 events per year. How many of them are tours and how many are local events?

BJÖRN GRALLA: Contra was mainly a tour agency when it started, and that’s still true today. Local business in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany’s most populated state) only accounts for between 10 and 20 percent of our events. As a German agency, we’re unusual because we stage concerts and shows all over Europe. Although we aren’t the only ones doing this, there are only a few others like us in the country.

Are there markets where you are particularly active?

ENRICO KAROLCZAK: That depends a lot on the artists. A band like Nightwish does well pretty much everywhere in Europe. For example, they’ve played to audiences of 12,000 in France and Switzerland. Sunrise Avenue is especially popular in Germany at present, but they also have a growing fanbase in Benelux, Austria, Switzerland, as well as Southern- and Eastern Europe. Guano Apes have always been big in the same markets, as well as especially Portugal.

Who are the most important artists on your books at present?

BJÖRN GRALLA: Nightwish, Sunrise Avenue and Guano Apes are definitely our biggest bands right now. But we’re always looking for new artists, so things can change quickly as new acts move into the limelight. We also think that Lena, who is known everywhere in Europe thanks to her success at the 2010 Eurovision Song Contest, is very promising.

How do you put your programme together?

ENRICO KAROLCZAK: We buy tours through agencies around the world. We also act as an international agent ourselves if the contact to the artist goes directly via the manager and he or she is interested in cooperating with us all over Europe. We’re doing this with a lot of artists at the moment. But it’s also important to be involved in artist development. In an ideal scenario, we support our artists from the smallest club all the way to the arena. One good example of this is Sunrise Avenue, who I discovered at a gig in their native Finland. There were 21 people in the audience. We’ve been in charge of booking the band throughout Europe for six years now. Now we can even sell out major arenas in most of the relevant countries we tour. We have specialized in Pop- Rock- and Metal-Bands, but continue to grow in all the leftfield acts we have on our radar. Every artist we believe in will be pushing hard to gain the maximum development.

Do you focus on particular types of events?

ENRICO KAROLCZAK: We are completely open to all musical genres and we try to have as broad a
repertoire as possible. We can feature the hardest metal, like our recent signings Kamelot, Overkill, Soilwork and Sonata Arctica. But then we also work with Lena, Right Said Fred, Vonda Shepard, Aimee Mann and comedians like Oliver Polak, one of the most important leftfield comedians in Germany. The only areas we don’t cover (except for a few cases) are German “Schlager” and classical music.

How big are your events?

**BJÖRN GRALLA:** The size of our events ranges from the smallest club gigs to sold-out concerts in big arenas. The Nightwish shows we organise can attract up to 15,000 people. We’ve had Nickelback in the Cologne Lanxess Arena playing to 16,000. Then of course there’s Gossip, Rihanna, 30 Seconds to Mars, Runrig, and many more. All of them sold out our shows we did here.

How tough is the competition for an independent company like yours?

**ENRICO KAROLCZAK:** We’re one of the biggest agencies in our state and our specialisation in especially Pop, Rock and Metal makes us unique in a way. We don’t see ourselves as competing with the global events agencies at all. In fact, we never shy away from anyone and we’re happy to collaborate with all kinds of players. Our bands often play at big festivals. Nightwish opened Wacken in 2013, and lots of our other bands often appear at Rock am Ring and Rock im Park just to name a few.

Do you organise festivals?

**BJÖRN GRALLA:** For seven years we exclusively produced one of the most important MTV-Music-Live-Show concepts for MTV, the fantastic “MTV Campus Invasion”. It held three open-air concerts each year and attracted between 15,000 and 20,000 people each venue. At present Contra is in charge of bookings and programme planning for the “Zeltfestival Ruhr” (Ruhr Tent-Festival), which attracted more than 130,000 visitors last year.

What kind of festival is that?

**BJÖRN GRALLA:** The Zeltfestival Ruhr is one of Germany’s largest and fastest growing festival concepts of a completely new festival generation and takes place in Bochum since 2008. I developed the concept, which is a real innovation, with two partners. We stage concerts and shows in three tents over a period of about three weeks. We’ve had some very high-profile acts in the past, such as Joe Cocker, Status Quo, Patricia Kaas, Beady Eye, Milow, Jamie Cullum, Simple Minds or Bush. The audience response has been amazing. In just five years, we’ve grown to over 60,000, with the same number of people coming to the tent area. Alongside the great shows, the Tent Festival has excellent food and a large crafts market with stalls from all over the world. The event is attractive because it’s a really high-quality experience. People spend a long time at our elaborately decorated Festival area – which is just the opposite of what you usually get at other European festivals. That means we can attract a lot of long-term visitors, and that’s good for sales.

What do you think sets Contra Promotion apart?

**BJÖRN GRALLA:** We have been an established agency for almost two decades and can guarantee our partners a high level of professionalism and reliability. We are proud of our status as one of Germany’s biggest independent players. As I said earlier, this makes us unique in a way. In addition it also has many tangible and financial advantages. In 20 years, we have never made a loss and we’ve never taken out a loan from a bank. We are a solid business and we’re growing organically and steadily – just like we always have.
EVENTS: ZFR – ZELTFESTIVAL RUHR . MTV CAMPUS INVASION . ON A DARK WINTER'S NIGHT
PROMOTED SHOWS: BRYAN ADAMS . ALEX MAX BAND FORMER THE CALLING . ASHLEY HICKLIN . ALEx MAX BAND FORMER THE CALLING . AShLEY hIcKLIn . ALEx MAX BAND FORMER THE CALLING . AShLEY hIcKLIn . ALEx MAX BAND FORMER THE CALLING
www.contrapromotion.com