

LEBONCOIN: A SUFFICIENCY SUCCESS STORY?

Interview with Amandine de Souza
General Manager of leboncoin



After graduating from the ESCP Business School, Amandine de Souza began her career in 2005 with the Bain & Company consultancy, splitting her time between France and Singapore and focusing on consumer goods and retail. In 2009, she decided to add an operational component to her strategic experience and joined the Casino supermarket group, initially as head of the homeware division before adding all non-food categories to her remit.

In 2015, she was appointed CEO of Westwing France, an e-commerce business selling home & living products. Three years later she jumped at the chance to become the head of the BHV Marais department store and take charge of home, DIY and leisure purchasing for the Galeries Lafayette group, where she also launched a vintage collection. A year later she added food and catering to her responsibilities as she took the helm of Eataly Paris Marais, a Galeries Lafayette group franchise, and joined the group's executive committee.

Since April, 2023 Amandine de Souza has been the General Manager of leboncoin, a very successful French secondhand platform.

Alongside her corporate career, she also co-founded Le Retail Club, a network for women leaders in retail, and in 2022 she joined Leia Capital, an all-women group of business angels that invests in female-led businesses. She is also an independent director of Carbios, a biotech providing enzymatic solutions for recycling plastic.

With over 28 million monthly users, leboncoin has emerged as one of the most successful incarnations of the circular economy. By enabling secondhand goods to become more widely used and more accessible, leboncoin encourages a form of sufficiency. However, as leboncoin's General Manager Amandine de Souza points out in this interview, it is a spontaneous, non-explicit form of sufficiency that coexists alongside other consumer aspirations such as people's desire to treat themselves, make a 'smart' purchase, unearth something unique, and limit their environmental footprint, as well as to regain the power to act and to control their consumption in an uncertain world. Ultimately, the success of leboncoin reflects the multiple facets, nuances and complexities of sufficiency that must be taken into account now more than ever if it is to become a desirable prospect for the greatest possible number of people.

With over 28 million monthly users, leboncoin is France's number one e-commerce website and an outstanding example of the circular economy in action. Would you say that leboncoin helps to encourage a form of sufficiency?

Amandine de Souza: Of course! The millions of secondhand items purchased, sold and donated every year via leboncoin undeniably encourage a form of sufficiency. But I would put it another way. Sufficiency is, for various reasons, not a concept we refer to spontaneously. Firstly because we do not set out to dictate what any particular consumer norm should be. The history of leboncoin is built first and foremost on people's real-life daily uses and habits. Their aspirations and desires are what shape the platform's categories. When leboncoin was first created 18 years ago, we would never have dreamt that categories such as job offers and property sales would take on such an important role. Today, leboncoin is the third most-consulted website for private sector job offers and is by far and away the leading website for property sales and rentals, with over a million advertisements permanently on the platform. This type of self-organization, the way that users collectively redefine leboncoin's social utility in response to the problems they encounter on a day-to-day basis, is one of the key features that sets us apart.



This is important as it reflects one of leboncoin's great strengths: it gives everybody a certain ability to act at the individual level. The individual's experience is, first of all, about (re)discovering their power to act, a form of control over their consumption and thus, to an extent, over their lives. One of the features most appreciated by the users we poll every year as part of our economic and societal impact study is this capacity to self-organize without intermediaries. This form of empowerment is all the more precious at a time when many people feel they have less and less control over their lives and the world they live in, particularly as a result of a climate emergency which can seem overwhelming due to its scale and systemic nature.

This power to act at the individual level has very concrete effects and explains why leboncoin has become so embedded in daily life and adopted in so many different ways: the ability to make smart purchases every day, to easily reconcile the affordable and desirable, to keep up appearances in a consumer society that is so excluding, to make a little extra income at a time when purchasing power is falling, and so on, all while meeting individual needs without any nudges from the outside. So if we can say that sufficiency does exist on leboncoin, it is spontaneous rather than conceptual, a sufficiency that is very real even if it remains unspoken.

One of the challenges to sufficiency centers on being seen as desirable by as many people as possible, a prospect that remains a long way off. By making secondhand part of everyday life, leboncoin seems to have partly solved this quandary. What is your view?

AdS: The challenges of perception and desirability are central to ensuring that the transition is acceptable to as many people as possible.

I believe leboncoin has helped accelerate new social norms and collective values, and has redefined the image people have of secondhand by making it normal. Buying secondhand was certainly not seen in such a good light a few years ago! Today, with the purchasing power restrictions along with a genuine shift in attitudes, secondhand is no longer taboo. One of many examples is the rise in secondhand gifting at Christmas. A recent survey we conducted with Ifop¹ showed that 4 out of 5 people in France believe it is the thought that counts at Christmas, irrespective of whether the gift is new or secondhand. A striking fact is that the proportion of people who have already given or received a secondhand gift is significantly higher among younger generations than older age groups.

¹ Ifop survey for leboncoin: Survey of purchases of secondhand gifts in France, November 2023.

The fact that leboncoin is a good example of the interconnection of sustainability and desirability stems from its universal character. Our surveys show that leboncoin is a faithful mirror of France: at a time when French society is becoming fragmented and some platforms are targeting specific communities, leboncoin really is a universal platform. leboncoin is useful to everybody no matter their gender, age – with a slightly larger number of users in the 25-50 age group – or income. It is also useful in every part of the country: small and large towns, semi-urban localities, the biggest cities as well as the countryside. And what applies to private individuals applies to professionals too: 75% of companies using leboncoin are SMEs with fewer than 10 employees, an accurate reflection of the French business landscape.

Our users tell us that this universal character, making it possible to create shared aspirations, goes hand in hand with their desire to restore meaning to the act of consumption. Our surveys bear this out, showing that the site shapes new norms for making more ecologically respectful purchases. Secondhand has become a normal part of daily life, making everybody a “discreet hero of ecological transition” in the words of Antoine Jouteau, my predecessor as general manager.

Finally, a word about desirability. leboncoin opens the door to purchases that are not just about finding bargains and low prices. It also gives everybody access to unique objects, items that bring joy as well as being useful. This is an

angle we highlight extensively in our communications and collaborations, this accessibility to items that are beautiful, fun or amusing, for example; basically everything that helps make life more pleasant. This is one of the keys to happy and desirable sufficiency, something people want to buy into rather than something imposed: we feel that guilt-laden messaging focused on self-imposed restrictions is an ineffective way to rally as many people as possible.

The success of leboncoin also resides in the success of digital technologies. Do you believe that digital has a specific role to play in encouraging the emergence of more sustainable consumer behaviors?

AdS: The success of leboncoin is certainly underpinned by two highly decisive developments: the digitalization of lifestyles, further accentuated by the Covid crisis, and the collapse in the attractiveness of rampant consumerist values.

Digital is a powerful accelerator that makes it possible to benefit from the potential of collective actions on a very large scale. In this case it has made possible the emergence of a true market for secondhand items that is easily accessible to all, with no entry barriers. When it was set up in 2006, the site's success was driven by the spread of home internet access.





Another point we feel to be key is making sure the customer experience remains as simple as possible. It is something we have never lost sight of, despite all the changes leboncoin has gone through since launch. leboncoin is a massive machine with millions of daily connections and almost as many online advertisements in 80 million permanent ads. 1,500 employees keep it going, over a third of them involved on the technical side. And despite all this, the site is simple to use for people who are not at ease with digital or the French language. You could say it is a bit like classical dance: there's a lot of work and effort but you have to leave all that behind the scenes when you go out to face the public!

This easy access to a more responsible form of consumption is crucial: among the multiple brakes preventing people from adopting behaviors more closely aligned with sufficiency, complexity and the commitment demanded – for example only buying local products – undeniably play a role. On the other hand, our ease of use allows us to aggregate people's practices and, ultimately, has a real impact in terms of the circular economy. Price clearly plays a part too. Even today, most so-called sustainable goods, for example many foods or clothes, are synonymous with significantly higher prices making them unaffordable to a large majority of households. Secondhand offers a chance to square this circle.

leboncoin – and this is both central and unique to our DNA – is a powerful illustration of how digital technologies can contribute to real-world social ties. This is the power of what sociologist Mark Granovetter termed the “strength of weak ties”: the multiplication of interpersonal relationships,

no matter how brief, contributes to recreating trust and grows people's social capital. As a digital platform as well as a physical intermediary, leboncoin is a genuine accelerator for social ties, with almost 31 million occasional meet-ups arranged via the site in France every year. It has even led to a few marriages!

Any closing remarks?

AdS: As we mentioned at the start of our conversation, leboncoin is interesting in that it is rooted in a principle as old as the world – buying secondhand – while being perfectly aligned

with modern-day consumer trends. It provides an answer to people's limited budgets – purchasing power is invariably the biggest motivation driving users – as well as to their environmental ambitions. Its no-frills interface is resolutely functional but the goods traded on the platform create emotions, whether for the buyer personally or as treats for friends and families. It is digital, which makes it fundamentally fairly cold, but is warmed by the 28 million people who connect each month, who meet up and, sometimes, become friends. People's motivations are not always the

same, they can be contradictory from one day to the next, even for the same person.

But this multiplicity is what gives our platform its strength. It shines a light on the “fifty shades” of sufficiency that currently coexist within our society, all of them certainly to be encouraged and nurtured. We hope to contribute to this process as best we can.

The multiplicity of motivations that drive users to visit leboncoin shines a light on the fifty shades of sufficiency that currently coexist within our society, all of them certainly to be encouraged and sustained. We hope to contribute to this process as best we can