Fred Burcksen joined ZDF Enterprises just a few years after its creation as the commercial arm of German pubcaster ZDF. Rising through the ranks from senior sales manager all the way up to executive VP and COO, Burcksen succeeded Alexander Coridass as the president and CEO of the group earlier this year. For Burcksen it’s business as usual at ZDF Enterprises as his team execute on the “ZDF Enterprises 2020” strategic plan. But that certainly doesn’t mean complacency as the company navigates the increasingly complex media landscape worldwide. While continuing to license its extensive content catalog—spanning drama, kids and unscripted—to broadcasters and platforms worldwide, ZDF Enterprises has stepped up its co-production activities and is eyeing more opportunities for third-party content. It is also looking at expanding the portfolio of companies in which it holds stakes on the heels of forming a joint venture with Beta Film and picking up an interest in World Media Rights in the U.K. Burcksen tells World Screen about what’s driving ZDF Enterprises’ business and outlines his priorities for the year ahead.

WS: You recently announced a reorganization of the factual and entertainment divisions. Why was this an important move?  
BURCKSEN: We decided, as part of ZDF Enterprises 2020, to merge our factual and entertainment divisions into one department for unscripted content as of January 2018. It was because there was some overlap between the two genres. And we felt that there were many synergies in terms of the combined sales power and better acquisition opportunities. We’re very strong in the field of documentary series and we want to improve ourselves when it comes to format sales. We have attractive formats, but they were never the highest priority. That’s why we’re trying to now put our focus on that. We have a hugely successful German format called Cash or Trash, which runs on ZDF every day. We’re taking it abroad together with Warner Bros., just as we are doing with Banijay on our classic format Wanna Bet?

WS: What are some of the new developments in your traditional doc business?  
BURCKSEN: In general, part of the strategy that we are rolling out is to get more third-party content. What we do with our network ZDF can’t be done any better. So, if we want to grow, we need third-party content. These programs don’t need to run on ZDF. That’s an essential element of our strategy that should bring us growth. The second priority is we’re investing more in development. We’ve always invested in programs as a co-producer or as a gap-financier. We’re now developing ourselves, which is an exciting element.

WS: How has your drama strategy evolved as the market has become even more competitive?  
BURCKSEN: Here too we have, over the last four to five years, invested more and more in our own development. The latest initiative was the founding of a company with Beta Film. Intaglio Films is a fifty-fifty joint venture in Berlin led by Frank Doelger, a U.S. showrunner whose credits include Games of Thrones. He’s exclusively tied to our company and is developing formats for us and our network. We also have the development entity G5 fiction with Uwe Kersken. And we’re working on establishing a third entity. These are not production companies; these are development units. That’s part of the strategy. It’s also about third-party content. So the drama department has acquired a lot of formats and series from international broadcasters and production companies that we invested in without knowing who the German broadcaster is going to be.

WS: What are some of the qualities you look for in drama projects that can travel?  
BURCKSEN: It’s the hardest question of all—if we knew [the right answer] we would have only successes and no failures! It’s high-end, it’s content that cannot be produced or financed by one party alone. They are mostly horizontally told stories. Crime is probably the easiest genre to sell globally. The goal is to be eclectic. And then it comes down to what we bump into or what's being offered to us. We try to get a perfect mix out of these projects.
WS: What about in the documentary space—what kinds of third-party projects are you looking to invest in?
BURCKSEN: We try to focus on history, science and wildlife. Within these traditional genres, we’re looking for popular series—pop science, not only blue-chip wildlife, an exciting personality that walks through the desert. Projects that make you fall in love with a character. The question is: is that factual or entertainment? That’s why we merged the two genres.

WS: On the kids’ side, are you continuing to invest in high-end tween series?
BURCKSEN: Heavily. We shouldn’t neglect the animation and the preschool series we have, but we’re best known for the live-action series. That’s going to be the primary focus, again together with our network ZDF. But we’ll sometimes go for a project without the backup of our network.

WS: Across the genres you operate in, co-productions have been essential. What are some of the things you’ve learned about managing those complex relationships?
BURCKSEN: What we’ve learned is that you need to trust the talent, you need to trust the writers, you need to trust the director or the showrunner. And try not to get in their way. You want to be involved, you want to read the scripts, you want to make notes—we still do that because we want to be thorough—but in the end, we’ll leave it up to the talent. That’s the experience we’ve had over the last couple of years. It has worked well.

WS: What’s your overall approach to managing the windowing strategy on a show?
BURCKSEN: It’s a difficult issue. And probably the answer will be a different one in six months and was a different one six months ago. We used to have this discussion when we talked about pay TV and free TV. Now we’re talking about linear and nonlinear. The key question is, who goes first? That has to be decided on a case-by-case basis. It’s fair to say that usually, if our network is involved, we’re always looking for a first run for ZDF. If our network is not involved, of course, we’re more flexible, and then it just comes down to the numbers. It’s a process.

WS: What role does M&A play for ZDF Enterprises as you expand your business?
BURCKSEN: We have two businesses under this roof. One is the distribution, which we’ve discussed. The other one is the participation in production companies. We are a shareholder in some 16 companies—15 of them are German. We are also very proud of our first international participation—we bought a share in the London-based production company World Media Rights. The goal within Germany or German-speaking territories is that, from the perspective of the network we represent, we want to have within the ZDF Enterprises group a share of what is commissioned by ZDF. That’s strategically important to get some independence from the major suppliers. Players like Warner Bros., Endemol Shine or UFA are important program suppliers to ZDF, but you want a part of this business to be within your own group. You want to bind the talent, to have some creative control over things. We are always looking to strengthen our portfolio of companies. We’d love to have a strong production company in Berlin, for instance. We’re doing it slowly. We’re very healthy, so one step at a time.

WS: What are some of your other significant growth opportunities in the one to two years ahead?
BURCKSEN: We’d like to add one or two companies to our portfolio. In distribution, the key element is third-party content. Again, what we do with our network can’t be done much better in terms of revenue and profit—it’s very efficient and very effective. So if we need to grow, we need to find third-party content. That’s always been an element in our business, but we’re giving it a lot more focus than we did in the last couple of years. The second strategic element that should bring us growth is investing heavily in our own online channels. We launched three channels on Amazon in Germany, we have around a dozen on YouTube and, by the end of the year, we want to have some 25 channels. That’s a strong focus.

The main message is, we are positioned very well. We’ve got a strategic plan that we are following. Everything looks very promising.