

# SEARCHING FOR THE FUTURE WORLD MARKET LEADER

**Frank Thelen** is a serial entrepreneur, technology investor, TV personality and author, and he is convinced that **additive manufacturing** is going to fundamentally change the world of industry: “The question is only exactly when that will take place.” In the meantime, he is searching for AM start-ups — and is quite choosy. In fact, he’s looking for nothing less than the next (first?) European AM unicorn\*.

by Agnes Zeiner

## Frank, what’s your connection to additive manufacturing?

At Freigeist, we want to help develop outstanding companies that have their roots in Europe. We’ve defined a “construction kit for the future” to assist in this and want to bring bright minds and their ideas together with the necessary capital. We’re convinced that AM represents a revolution that, while it may be just starting now, will totally change industry in ten years. It’s similar to the Internet where you knew: This is going to change our world — but no one could predict just exactly how.

## Where does Freigeist find its investments?

We have experts for all of the areas we have defined in our “construction kit for the future” and we cooperate closely with universities. This means we can identify relevant topics and start-ups very early on.

## Do you already have AM start-ups in the Freigeist portfolio?

We invest in start-ups that are still in the early phase, so this would be the venture capital area. A second focus is our equity fund 10xDNA with which we invest in up-and-coming companies that are already listed on the stock

exchange. Unfortunately, we haven’t found the right investment yet in the area of AM for either category.

## Why not?

In spite of several meetings with European start-ups, we haven’t found a good match yet. We have high expectations. For an investment, both the team and the phase through which the start-up is currently moving need to be just right. The technology also needs to be scalable so that a multi-billion euro company can result from it.

## What advantages do tech start-ups have over established (industrial) enterprises?

When an industrial sector is radically changed by a technology, companies must react with agility. Large, established companies often find this difficult: They are unable to part with their core business and consequently do not invest enough in the paradigm shift. A good example is the automotive sector and electromobility.

Young, new players, on the other hand, are able to fully concentrate on the new technology with no regard for legacy “dead wood”. They also have a different mindset. For them it’s: “Do or die” — they have no alternative other

than to take the initiative and go all in with innovation.

## How can start-ups and industrial companies get together and how can established enterprises foster start-ups?

There is no other way: start-ups and industrial companies must get together! As far as the acquisition of start-ups by established companies is concerned, China and the USA are ahead of us. Here in Europe, and especially in the DACH region, companies often suffer from the “not-invented-here” syndrome — they try too hard to be innovative themselves instead of taking over promising start-ups.

If a takeover occurs or a cooperation is established, the partners must each be able to act on an equal footing. That also means accepting that the start-up is better at its business than the concern that seeks to foster or acquire it. And: The DNA of a start-up must not be destroyed through the integration process, because if the leading thinkers become frustrated and leave the company, both sides lose.

**Thank you for your time.**

## Personal details:

Frank Thelen started his first (of seven to date) company in 1994. Today, with his venture capital firm Freigeist, he invests in European tech start-ups. He is known to a broader audience as one of the judges and investors in the German television show “Die Höhle der Löwen” (“The Lions’ Den”) 2014 to 2020.

Official websites:

[frank.io](https://frank.io)

[freigeist.com](https://freigeist.com)

[10xdna.com](https://10xdna.com)

\* A unicorn refers to a start-up company that is valued at more than 1 billion US dollars. One of the unicorns with the highest valuation is Elon Musk’s SpaceX.

