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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT 5

The Startup Inside a Family Business: VILPE's Playbook for the U.S.

Insights from Tuomas Saikkonen, CEO, and Carina Lagerström, Development Manager, VILPE

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Why This Interview Matters

What happens when a Finnish family business with five decades behind it adopts the mindset of a startup? For VILPE, a family-owned roofing technology company founded in 1975, the answer is an ambitious expansion into the United States.

Under second-generation CEO Tuomas Saikkonen, VILPE is combining established expertise in building technology with a new approach to international growth. At the center of that expansion is VILPE Sense, an intelligent system designed to detect moisture problems early and help extend the lifespan of buildings.

But bringing Finnish innovation across the Atlantic takes more than a promising product. It takes preparation, trusted relationships, and a willingness to commit to a market. In this Member Spotlight, Saikkonen and Development Manager Carina Lagerström share the thinking behind VILPE's American ambitions, the groundwork that led to its Ohio operations, and what they have learned along the way.

The Conversation

From family business to global innovation

VILPE was founded in 1975 by Eero Saikkonen, Tuomas's father, a roofer by trade who became a product developer and holds a number of patents. The company employs approximately 150 people and operates 22,500 square meters of factory and office space at Mustasaari, near Vaasa. In 2025 it opened a new logistics and research site in Vantaa, which earned the highest BREEAM In-Use score ever awarded in Finland. There are subsidiaries across Scandinavia, the Baltics and Poland, and the business remains in the family, owned by Tuomas and his sister.

Tuomas studied business at the University of Vaasa, joined the company full time after graduating, spent five years in sales and as sales director, and became CEO in January 2020. Carina Lagerström joined VILPE fourteen years ago as an export assistant and has worked in IT, export and customer service since. She has been a development manager for around six years and has been part of the North American project from the beginning.

Tuomas captures the company's mindset with a touch of humor:

> *“We are a young, agile 52-year-old family company with a startup inside it, and our biggest startup is the United States.”*

The innovation opening new markets

VILPE built its reputation on roof ventilation: the mushroom-shaped fixing that gave the company its start, along with sewer vents, exhaust pipes and roof fans, sold across Europe for decades. VILPE Sense is something different, and it is what makes this particular expansion possible.

Sensors roughly the size of a pen are laid into the insulation layer of a flat roof, reporting twice a day. VILPE Sense combines two complementary solutions that can operate independently or together. The Leak Detector uses sensors and a digital humidity map to help identify areas where moisture is accumulating. The Humidity Control system can automatically ventilate roof structures when conditions allow, helping remove excess moisture.

By detecting elevated moisture before visible damage develops, the system enables earlier intervention, supports preventive maintenance and can help extend the service life of roofing structures. Sensor density is matched to what is being protected: a data center is covered as tightly as possible, while a warehouse with less sensitive contents can have more space between sensors.

The application travels in a way that building products rarely do. Roof construction is shaped by local convention, from the height of pipes to the profile of roof penetrations, which is why a catalog built for one market needs adapting for the next. A system that reads what is happening inside an insulation layer is relevant wherever flat roofs are built, which is why VILPE Sense is the product leading the company into America.

Why America, and why now

VILPE had a technology with genuine global potential, and chose to build its European experience with it first, deliberately, before taking it anywhere more demanding. By the time the company turned to the United States, the system had been through real installations and the organization knew how to run it.

The United States offers an enormous market for commercial building technology, making it a natural next step for a company with VILPE's international growth ambitions.

The U.S. subsidiary was established in October 2025 and operations began in early 2026.

Building the foundation in Ohio

Carina Lagerström has been closely involved in VILPE's North American expansion from the beginning. Together with Tuomas and the broader project team she has taken a hands-on approach to market research, evaluating locations, developing partnerships and establishing the company's American presence.

The team traveled widely across the United States, met Economic Development Organizations and built relationships one introduction at a time. VILPE also participated in Business Finland delegation trips and SelectUSA events, helping establish valuable connections and expand its network of potential partners.

The Midwest emerged for practical reasons. The climate is close enough to Finland's that the products suit it, and the contacts were there. JobsOhio, the state's economic development organization, proved particularly active, and the support it offered made a material difference.

Many states were helpful, Carina says, but Ohio was the one that felt right on arrival, and the one where they found a place that fit.

VILPE is continuing to build its team in Ohio, with plans to expand its sales presence into other parts of the United States. The company is also evaluating locations for a future manufacturing facility, marking another important step in its long-term American growth strategy.

Early customer projects are already demonstrating the technology's practical value. In a case study published by VILPE, Ohio-based manufacturer Thogus Products reported that VILPE Sense detected two roof-moisture incidents during its first year of use, allowing the facility manager to address both issues before they became serious. Examples like these are helping VILPE demonstrate the technology's benefits as it builds its presence in the American market.

Why relationships matter

Asked what proved most valuable in the preparation phase, both of them answered the same way, and it was not research. It was the network.

> *“When you meet someone, they will often introduce you to the next person you should meet. That is how one conversation leads to another.”*

Carina describes planning trips around the network rather than the map: if you know someone, you ask who is worth meeting where you are going, and the list grows. A message that begins with a name in common opens a door that a cold approach does not. She also found an openness to new technology, and a willingness to test new technologies faster than other markets will.

Tuomas expected the opposite, having assumed that the European construction market was the relationship-driven one. He found it was the other way around, and that trust is built by turning up repeatedly rather than in a single visit. Building trust takes persistence. Returning to meet the same people, maintaining relationships and demonstrating long-term commitment can gradually turn initial contacts into valuable introductions and commercial opportunities. That is also the argument for concentrating rather than spreading: a company trying to cover fifty states at once will never meet anyone often enough to build anything. Relationship-building also extends beyond formal business meetings. Tuomas describes how attending Dallas Stars games with American contacts has provided opportunities to strengthen relationships in a more informal setting.

Lessons from the American market

Three lessons come through clearly, and they apply well beyond roofing.

The first concerns the market study, and it inverts the usual order of operations.

> *“Do not research whether there is a market for you in the United States. Research where your market is.”*

The second is about the value proposition. It has to be strong, clear and compressible to about twenty seconds. VILPE's evolved over the roughly two and a half years of preparation that preceded the move, and Tuomas does not pretend it arrived fully formed.

The third is about preparation and cost. As Tuomas explains, the costs extend well beyond market research and travel. Establishing a local presence can require expertise across corporate law, taxation, immigration, employment, product certification and operational systems. Accounting for these requirements early is an important part of preparing for the U.S. market.

The next chapter

VILPE has publicly set itself a target of 30 million euros in U.S. turnover by 2030. Tuomas frames what that represents in terms of the company's own history.

> *“It took us fifty years as a family company to reach thirty million in revenue. We want to achieve the same in the United States in five.”*

His advice to other Finnish companies weighing the move is short. Go, because it is the biggest market in the world and genuine growth is there. Then be clear with yourself about what you intend to be in that market in five or ten years, because the people you hire will need to understand it. If the direction is not clear to you, it will not be clear to them.

VILPE's expansion reflects a combination of careful preparation, ambitious thinking, and a willingness to commit to new opportunities. By building on decades of Finnish expertise while embracing the agility of a startup, the company is laying the foundation for its next chapter of international growth.

That balance is at the heart of Tuomas's vision: half a century of experience and expertise in Europe, combined with the speed and flexibility of a startup in America.

Prepared by the Finnish American Chamber of Commerce – New York, based on an interview with Tuomas Saikkonen and Carina Lagerström, October 2026. Quotes translated and lightly edited from Finnish for clarity.



Tuomas Saikkonen, CEO, VILPE. Photo: VILPE



Carina Lagerström, Development Manager, VILPE. Photo: VILPE