

Press release

VDMA Plastics and Rubber Machinery Association

Two years ago, the VDMA launched its Blue Competence sustainability initiative. A total of nearly 400 firms have now signed up for it, 54 of which are members of the Plastics and Rubber Machinery Association. That makes the industry a trailblazer among German plant and machinery manufacturers when it comes to environmental protection, conservation of resources and management efficiency.

For those firms, Blue Competence will also play a prominent part at “K 2013”, the world’s leading plastics and rubber industry trade fair, to be held in Düsseldorf in October. With that in view, the VDMA is introducing a number of them in a series of press releases.



Sustainability brings competitive edge

Sumitomo (SHI) Demag builds on Japanese experience

Frankfurt, 18 July 2013 – Interview with Thomas Brettnich, Head of Technology Development at Sumitomo (SHI) Demag. The company is part of the Plastics Machinery Division of the Japanese Sumitomo Heavy Industries group. Sumitomo SHI Demag makes injection moulding machines in Germany.



Mr Brettnich, what are the sustainability successes that qualified your company for the Blue Competence Initiative?

Thomas Brettnich: We were pleased about the initiative. We had already been pursuing sustainability for quite some time. We were straight away able to mention a number of factors that make us sustainable. One example is our energy-saving drives for used machines. As a machinery manufacturer, we do not concentrate only on making new products more and more efficient. We also make sure that our customers are always able to keep their existing machines equipped with state-of-the-art energy saving technology. Our machines have an average service life of around 20 years. For several years now we have observed that customers are tending to operate their existing machines for longer because they are reluctant to make new investments. If at the same time our machines will last for longer and longer, that means there will be an increasing demand for retrofits to upgrade them. More and more customers are asking for components that will make the machines more energy-efficient. That is a powerful trend.

How important is sustainable manufacturing for your customers?

Brettnich: Plastics manufacturers are under enormous cost pressures, not least because end users are increasingly asking for evidence of their environmental credentials. Major supermarket chains like Wal-Mart for example want the environmental sustainability of virtually every yoghurt pot to be traceable from the carbon footprint. Retailers therefore keep

up the pressure until ultimately it reaches machinery manufacturers. In Europe in particular we are finding that, despite high initial costs, firms are investing more so that they can demonstrate their own sustainability.

That ought to improve the industry's image.

Brettnich: Of course. Plastics are replacing other materials in many areas and products. Take lightweight construction in the motor industry, for example. Plastics have now replaced a lot of metal parts and are increasingly being used instead of glass as well. That brings a considerable reduction in weight and hence appreciable fuel savings. The trend has been continuing apace for several years now.

Plastics are therefore contributing to sustainability all over the world. It is no exaggeration to say that without plastics global energy consumption would be a great deal higher than it actually is. Many people are critical of plastics because oil is used to make them. But only around six per cent of total oil production is accounted for by the manufacture of plastics. The amount of oil consumed is insignificant compared to the resources that are saved by using plastics.

Your company belongs to a Japanese parent group. How serious are the Japanese about sustainability?

Brettnich: Japan is a small country with a high population density. That means that productivity has of necessity always been important there. We here in Germany are the group's trailblazers in production efficiency and environmental management. The optimisations developed here are transferred to the other production plants.

With injection moulding machines, the type of drive is a major factor in energy consumption. But is it just energy consumption that determines the choice of drive?

Brettnich: The advantages of electric drives compared to other types are simply indisputable: they are very quiet, use less energy and produce less waste heat. However, the process-related advantages following from greater precision and reproducibility are generally more important. On the other hand, a fully electric drive is more expensive. But as quantities increase, costs decline and prices fall. It is important for us at Sumitomo (SHI) Demag that we make the motors ourselves. That is the only way we can pass on the cost savings quickly to the customer. For those of our customers who buy electric drives, we aim for a return on investment of three years, in other words a machine should have paid for itself in that time.

When will electric drives become the norm?

Brettnich: In 10 to 20 years' time injection moulding machines will only have electric drives. The pace of change will not be the same in different parts of the world: it will be faster in Asia and the US but slower in Europe. That is because we have a long tradition of hydraulic drives in Europe. It was machine tool manufacturers who pioneered the switch from hydraulic to electric drives.

Key question: Why is the Blue Competence Initiative important for you?

Brettnich: With Blue Competence the VDMA is educating the public. In that way, it is helping to improve the image of the plastics industry of which we as a machinery manufacturer are a part. Blue Competence fits the bill for us in particular because the initiative backs our company's philosophy and our sustainability objectives. But we have broadened the concept of sustainability further to include our workforce, for example. Human beings as a resource, so to speak. Our aim is to keep employee turnover as low as possible. We would like people to spend their whole working lives with us. As I see it, the American model of maximum flexibility has had its day. We would rather see a return to the traditional German or Japanese way of doing things. In Germany we have yet to see the demographic situation that has long obtained in Japan: an ageing society with a looming shortage of labour. As a result, every effort must be made to keep employees on board. We are very creative when it comes to holding on to our workforce.

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The more than 200 members of the Plastics and Rubber Machinery Association within the German Engineering Federation (VDMA) are the most important firms in the industry, accounting for over 90 per cent of its total sales. German plastics and rubber machinery manufacturers are world leaders with market shares of over 25 per cent in exports.