

Making the connection

Sporting a philosophy of inventing market-orientated products, combined with innovation and vision, PES discovers how the firmly-established Multi-Contact has adapted to the challenges that the global quest for renewable energy presents. We speak to CEO, Rainer Isenrich...

PES: Can you explain a little about your company and what you offer the renewable energy industry?

Rainer Isenrich: Multi-Contact (MC) offers solutions in the broad field of electrical contacts. We focus on contacts for high power requirements, like high current ratings, harsh environments, etc. MC has over 40 years of experience in connectors for industries such as: switchgears, bus bar connectors, medical connectors, connectors for robots and measurement. As part of this experience, MC developed as the first company to make connectors for PV modules, back in 1992. Today, besides connectors, MC offers standard as well as customer specific junction boxes and cables suited to PV needs.

PES: How did the company progress into the solar sector?

RI: As MC is well known for its quality and innovative power, pioneering solar customers turned to us as they wanted to connect modules easily and reliably. Their problem was that existing 'off the shelf' connectors could not withstand the high requirements regarding heat and current. MC was able to develop a solution, based on which the renowned, market leading "MC 3 mm" and "MC 4 mm" range of connectors were established.

PES: How vital are standards of quality to your production?

RI: Module manufacturers give warranties of 20 years and more for their products. It

is important to remember that the modules, and therefore also the connectors, are exposed to harsh weather conditions on a daily basis, often in remote or difficult to access locations. And most importantly, they have to sustain daily temperature cycles that can go from below freezing to up to 90°C. You can imagine that the quality requirements are crucial. Recent issues in the industry turned the spotlight back toward quality and it is necessary for us to respond. We are also aware that customers require a higher level of quality, including service quality like delivery standards, on a global basis. MC products and services are not only designed to meet the highest standards, but with over 15 years of experience, our products have expertise as standard.

PES: Can you explain what part the development of the MC-Multilam played in the success of your organisation?

RI: The Multilam is the core of our products, through which the current finds its path from the plug to the socket. The Multilam idea was invented by MC and brought to the market via millions of products. It assures reliability – as can be experienced by constant electrical contact resistance and mechanical force over years – and quality, in the sense of low and defined electrical contact resistance and contact forces.

PES: R&D is obviously a vital aspect of your operation – is your investment in this arena reaping rewards?

RI: R&D is important for us in two ways.

Firstly, it helps us to remain at the forefront of contact technology, regarding the development of new Multilams. Secondly, an important part of our business is with customer specific products. R&D here helps us to design flexible solutions that meet the needs of our customers. We employ well over 60 engineers and designers – this is almost 10% of our workforce - who work daily on the future of MC and who have helped us to steadily grow over the past 40 years.

PES: How will global warming affect your business?

RI: Global warming and alternative energies are very closely linked together in the sense that to solve the challenges of global warming, alternative energies are clearly in higher demand. As we are well placed in these industries, global warming affects us very positively business-wise. Obviously we are not blind to the serious threats global warming poses to mankind, however, for us at MC this is also a main driver for innovation. We work on terrific projects for solar applications. Here, our creative and engineering power is challenged – a dream of every engineer.

PES: Can you explain what challenges you face when trying to get your corporate message out to prospective clients?

RI: It finally burns down to having enough time from the customer to listen to our message. As an example, we face unfair competition through Asian counterfeits. These products look alike, show similar data – no wonder, as our technical data



sheets simply have been downloaded from our internet site – but have clearly inferior characteristics. As our customers cannot spot this at first sight, they might just argue about the price difference they see in an offer, and they do not take sufficient time to look at the products in detail.

PES: What single piece of information would you most like to share with our readers?

RI: MC is and will remain a leading international partner for high demanding electrical contact applications. With this narrow focus, the customer has been, and shall continue to be, able to receive optimal solutions looking at the whole supply and production chain. We work on several projects where indeed the cost along the whole process is crucial and is revolutionary. Maybe the connector or the junction box can cost a little more, but if the connector is easily mountable in the automated PV module production, the overall cost can be reduced enormously.

PES: What measures do you take to reduce the impact of your manufacturing plants on the environment?

RI: With enforcing the RoHS regulation, the electrical industry has gone a good way in improving environmental threats. MC products fully comply RoHS. Fortunately, most of our efforts to optimise cost are very much in line with environmental requirements: e.g. optimisation of design, reduction of scrap and implementing quality at the spot of production. All this leads to

reduced material use, reduced energy use and reduced transport cost.

PES: You have expanded into many territories around the world – where are you targeting next?

RI: As we are part of the Swiss Stäubli group, we take advantage of their locations. This helped us ramp up a production for junction boxes in China, for the local market, in very short time. Besides consolidating existing markets in Europe, the US and in China, we target markets in the Eastern European countries, in Asia (e.g. Taiwan and Hong Kong) and India. India, with its energy demand, will be a market of the future for MC.

PES: What frustrates you about your industry and conversely, what excites you?

RI: The excitement is overwhelming: there are so many opportunities – be it in the renewable energy sector, be it in the general industry and energy sector – that we are very optimistic about our future. If there are any disappointments – rather than frustrations – it is that counterfeiters and copiers steal know-how again and again and undermine quality in a way that threatens whole markets.

PES: What's the single biggest threat to your business? And what measures are you taking to safeguard your company's position?

RI: When talking about threats it is important to realise that MC is a very balanced

company. We operate six engineering locations and production sites, we have a broad base of suppliers, we operate in a broad range of applications and we have a good geographical coverage of our turnover. This means that there is no risk that would threaten us about which our customers, employees or shareholders would have to seriously worry.

But there are risks we consider. At the moment, the biggest risk is to keep up with the huge PV market demand and assure timely deliveries. We have had delivery delays with some products, but as we have now significantly increased our production volume, we are on the safe side at the moment. We are already planning for the next capital investments to cope with new demands highs though.

PES: What's the single biggest threat to the solar industry?

RI: Management of change is probably the risk of the future in this industry. As it is booming, many things will change rapidly and some companies will “miss the boat”. Only the global acting companies who are well prepared, flexible, innovative, reliable and ready to take some risk will survive.

We believe that increased automation and partnering (e.g. through joint R&D projects, outsourcing, etc.) is crucial in order to deliver the requested cost advantages on one side and on the other side to grow fast. ■

For further information please visit www.multi-contact.com