

A focus on quality with a strong technical background is a part of our culture

One of the most forward-looking operators within the PV industry, Multi-Contact is nevertheless built upon decades of innovation and experience across a broad sweep of industries. PES caught up with Vice-President Sales & Marketing, Philippe Grunenberger, who is currently exploring previously-untapped global markets for the company.

PES: Welcome back to PES. For the benefit of any new readers who perhaps might not be acquainted with Multi-Contact, would you be able to outline how your company benefits the solar industry?

Philippe Grunenberger: MC has been among the leaders in the PV industry for more than 10 years. We supply global top module companies, system integrators, inverter manufacturers and installers with our MC3 and MC4 connector lines and other products out of our PV portfolio.

Founded in Basle, Switzerland, in 1962, Multi-Contact develops and manufactures connector systems for various industries such as power distribution, automation, PV, medical and test & measurement. In addition to our broad standard product range, we are specialised in designing customised solutions, based on our unique MC Multilam Technology.

PES: As a company with many areas of focus, how has your business adapted to demand from the solar industry?

PG: PV business has strongly increased over the last years and now represents an important part of our business areas and turnover. Multi-Contact will continue to focus on this strong growing market. In 2009 we set up a new factory in Essen, Germany, exclusively dedicated to the development and production of products for the PV market.

PES: What are your strategic plans for 2010?

PG: 2010 will be a very important year for MC since we will introduce some new products for several customer groups. However, it is still too early to provide more detailed information.

Besides new products, MC will continue to expand the production capacities according to the market expectations and beyond. We will ramp-up new plants in North America and China to serve the local markets in these increasing PV regions. We will also expand our already wide sales network and start to set-up new companies in emerging markets like India and Russia.

PES: A company such as yours cannot exist without extensive certification. Do you find this level of regulation a help or a hindrance?

PG: We fully support certifications and standards for the PV industry, and we think it is very important to have a high safety level. As a Swiss company, focus on quality with a strong technical background is a part of our culture, and it is also an important part of our package offered to customers. We fulfil the latest ISO quality standards and for our PV products we always aim to have dual-rated products, including TÜV and UL. Most of our PV products are submitted to lots of additional tests to be sure to fulfil the expected lifetime of 25 years.

PES: With solar applications being rolled out into more extreme geographic regions, do you find that you continually have to adapt your technology to cope with the weather conditions?

PG: We supply components to the industry which are tested and released according to international standards. The tests simulate a long-term operation and examine the reliability over the whole life cycle, also considering humidity conditions.

For new regions with tough environment situations we recommend more detailed testing procedures according to the real conditions.

PES: The quest for grid parity is driving the entire industry. Do you find that you are being pressured to lower your prices to help achieve this?

PG: There is a pressure on the prices today and we do understand this of course, because it will be mandatory for the whole PV industry to reach grid parity very soon. On the other hand, there are limited possibilities to cut costs for the components dramatically – for example, to reduce prices according to the reduced feed-in tariff like often requested is not possible.

Having a product that is able to fulfil the standards throughout a lifetime of 25 years requires the use of expensive materials which does not allow an indefinite reduction of the prices. Like

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FoxBox, junction box for automated assembly



MC3 and MC4 connectors



Profile of MC4 showing MC Multilam



MC4 connector with cable

in all industries, in the PV field you will find different levels of quality and prices. Multi-Contact will not make any compromises regarding quality in order to reduce the prices.

PES: You're an internationally-recognised company and yet we note that your area of focus is mainly European. Are you looking to expand further into growth regions such as Asia?

PG: In addition to the aforementioned expansion in Germany, we have also made investments into our Asian and US facilities during the last year, and will continue doing so in the coming years.

International markets are becoming much more important for MC and we have noticed a strong growth especially in the Asian countries. Besides production sites we also invest in sales and service activities there. We are already represented by our own sales force all over Asia today.

PES: Can you explain a little about the development of new products – are you inspired by feedback that you receive from your clients?

PG: We are mainly driven by the input of our customers. During personal visits and market research activities we get important feedback which we use for our specification sheets for new products. Our target is to offer innovative and excellent technical solutions off the shelf

as well as customised solutions for the customer's specific needs.

PES: You launched the FLEX-SOL-XL cables last year – how have they been received by the industry?

PG: The cable business is very difficult at the moment, and there is huge competition. As manufacturer you can choose to be the cost leader or the quality leader, and we selected the second possibility. Our FLEX-SOL-XL cable has been on the market for less than a year, and we are currently nearly running at capacity.

PES: Can you tell us about the after-sales service you offer to your clients?

PG: Our technical sales engineers participate in customer projects directly on the spot if requested, e.g. during the ramp-up phase of a new PV module production, in order to provide the best possible support.

Since we are more and more represented in countries where PV is attractive either for production or for installation, we have engineers ready to intervene in case any problems occur. But still the best after-sales service is to offer quality products in the first place.

PES: Let's imagine you can look into your crystal ball – how do you predict the solar industry will develop over the next few years?

PG: The general indicators for the PV market are still very good and

optimistic, so there is hardly any doubt about this future business. PV will continue to grow but will also be subject to some ups and downs in the future, which will make it difficult to plan production.

A good example is the situation that most companies are facing at the moment. Nobody anticipated such a sharp increase in demand in such a short time. We further expect a concentration of big players, and we've already noticed a strong trend back to quality, at least as far as the top players are concerned.

PES: The effectiveness of your products presumably depends upon the contractor who fits them. How do you ensure the skilled installation?

PG: One of the most important topics is to design products that are easy to handle and to assemble with low failure potential. The products have to be very robust for this rough environment. We also offer specific training to our partners if requested by our local technical engineers during regular visits or at training events. Moreover, we include detailed manual instructions in all our deliveries, explaining all necessary steps in detail. ■

For further information, visit:
www.multi-contact.com