

A world-class competitor: two years on

PES last spoke to Robert Bürkle GmbH's Managing Director in 2008, when Hans-Joachim Bender was bullish about the company's future prospects. Indeed, he said: "Bürkle orientates itself on the known forecasts for developments in the photovoltaic industry. This has resulted in a strategy that is valid until the year 2012, and during this time the turnover will be more than doubled...Bürkle's target is to become the world leader for lamination lines for the photovoltaic industry. Moreover, the company will shortly be in the position to supply the entire back-end for thin film modules and it will develop new lines. The company will also handle the crystalline sector. Bürkle will turn into a player well-known in the photovoltaic industry worldwide within the next years." Two years on, and despite a turbulent economic backdrop, the company is very much at the forefront of the PV sector. We caught up with new MD, Detlev Koch, in Germany.

PES: Welcome back to PES magazine. How has trade progressed since we last spoke?

Detlev Koch: Trade has developed really well. Based on the drop in price per Wp, the PV industry is booming. It seems that the cut in earnings has been compensated by low investment.

PES: Bürkle has more than 700 staff members worldwide – what steps do you take to keep them all motivated, and working towards the same goals?

DK: Bürkle management was able to bridge the year 2009 without any cuts in personnel. This is highly appreciated by our staff members, and customer focus is therefore well-established in all our minds.

We conduct open discussions with our staff and provide them with transparent information about the business which

makes our targeted goals clear to everyone.

PES: How do the needs of your PV clients differ from your other clients?

DK: The PV industry is going to new standards which are more or less adopted from SEMI (Semiconductor Equipment and Materials International). And therefore, the price pressure from the markets urge our customers to focus on TCO (Total Cost of Ownership) more than ever. Yield, uptime and the use of materials are the points where we face the highest need for focus.

PES: Bürkle took the innovative step of hiring brand developer Manfred Gotta when marketing the Ypsator – has this investment paid off?

DK: In our times, the function and costs of the laminator are one point, the design

of the system is another. We feel that the last decision is influenced by the outlook with a value of at least 20 per cent.

PES: It's been interesting to note the increase in consumer-targeted mass marketing by companies in the renewable energy sector – for example, Yingli Solar's sponsorship of the World Cup. Where is the value in this, and is it a strategy that Bürkle subscribes to?

DK: The end customers are different for Yingli and Bürkle. We are not facing the end-users so the sponsorship for World Cups are not a target for Bürkle.

PES: Bürkle's target is to become the world leader for lamination lines for the Photovoltaic industry. How close are you to achieving this goal?

DK: With our manufacturing in China we are getting closer to the biggest



market for the PV industry. The ramp-up of production in China will be finished in 2010 and we are sure to be able to compete with a high-quality product in the Asian region of the world.

Meanwhile, with the Ypsator, we have the best experience and the system is well adopted in the market. We think that in 2012 we should be able to reach this target.

PES: Does the company collaborate with external agencies/experts to refine its products? Do you feel that collaboration is a valuable way of working?

DK: We cooperate with different institutes and companies to develop new materials for consumables to get better lifetimes and lower costs. It is essential to work with partners because we cannot do all research by ourselves.

PES: How important is the European market to your global operations? Is there one particular area where you are seeing growth?

DK: We are seeing growth in all regions of the world. The share between the US-EU-ASEAN markets is roughly a third each. And based on political decisions to push for local-made products, the motivation for local investments is increasing.

PES: Also, as a European company, how has the financial market and the exchange rate impacted upon your business this past year?

DK: The financial situation is well known. Customers are more and more reluctant to pre-finance their plants and we are urged to find solutions together with our banks to minimise the risks by not losing business.

PES: Increasing yield while maintaining quality is of paramount importance to your clients. How do your products facilitate this?

DK: These two points go hand-in-hand. As mentioned before, we are maintaining the quality of our consumables. If we are able to double the lifetime of membranes and belts, we can definitely cut the breakage of modules and end-up with a higher yield. The improvement of 0.1 per cent in yield will result in a six digit number of Euros cost-savings for our customers

PES: After-sales support is a massive concern for potential clients. How do you address this concern?

DK: We have a well-established CS (Customer Service) team worldwide. And with training sessions in our Innovation Centre in FDS we are able to always provide the best knowledge in the field – on our side, as well as through customer maintenance personnel. In any case, we do have a remote access to our installed systems to support our customers with very short reaction times. In the near future we will also introduce a call centre with 24/7 reaction.

PES: We're hearing a lot about traceability in the solar sector? Is this something that your clients are demanding, and do you offer solutions to meet these demands?

DK: Of course, traceability is a must in today's PV market. For the modules, this is done by MES systems which are basic element of a turn-key line. All data related to production are stored and traceable by module. ■

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Robert Bürkle GmbH charts booming growth in 2010

In June this year, Bürkle posted first-half growth that included a continuously increasing receipt of orders since the beginning of the year, which culminated in 42 million Euros by 30th June 2010. This order value is three times higher than in the previous year and also higher than in the first two quarters of the booming years of 2007 and 2008.

"Consequently, the planned sales target of more than 85 million Euros for 2010 is realistic to achieve", explained Hans-Joachim Bender. After the economic crisis in 2009 this would mean a gain in turnover of more than 30 per cent. Bender expects to achieve the turnover of the record year 2008 of 115 million Euros again, at the latest in 2012.

30 per cent of this turnover has been earned by the pioneering multi-opening technology of the company's PV business unit. More than 60 lines of the brand Ypsator and single-opening laminators have been sold since market entry three years ago.

In 2010 Bürkle wants to keep the number of employees at 480 at sites in Freudenstadt and Mastholte. "We have not dismissed anybody during the crisis and we would like to achieve good results with our well-cooperating team in 2010," explains Bender, who is engaged in the managing board of the VDMA sector photovoltaics and wood-processing machines.

For its innovative processes and developments, Bürkle had been rewarded with a German Top 100 Award again this year.

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